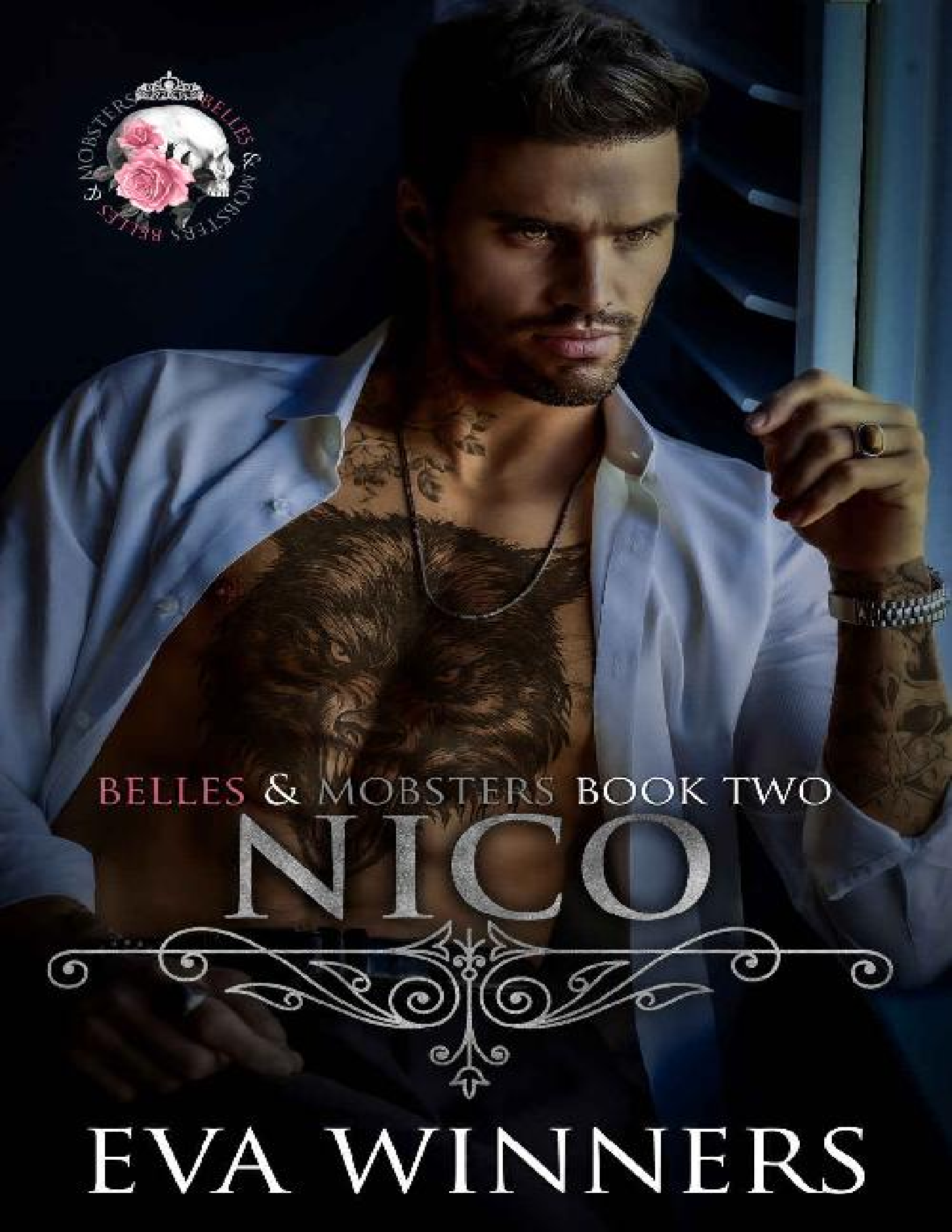
BELLES & MOBSTERS
BELLES & MOBSTERS
BELLES & MOBSTERS BOOK TWO
NICO
EVA WINNERS

NICO

Belles & Mobsters Series Collection

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EVA WINNERS

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To my daughters, love you always and forever. You are my reason.

To my Happy Hour Ladies – you help me keep my sanity. What happens at the happy hour, stays there. Right?

To all my family and friends – thank you!

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BELLES & MOBSTERS SERIES COLLECTION

Each book in the Belles & Mobster series can be read as a standalone.

If you'd like a preview to the Belles and Mobsters Cassio, Book Three, make sure to keep reading and check out the prologue after the ending of Nico.

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PLAYLIST

IF YOU'D LIKE to hear a soundtrack with songs that are featured in this book, as well as songs that inspired me, here's the link:

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/73laD9ZDjTyN9wyoOQayU9?si=PrC_6tYPSPCOGtJzxQySnw

In no particular order…

"Play With Fire" - Nico Santos
"Hit the Road Jack" - Ray Charles
"Safe" - Nico Santos
"Salt" - Ava Max
"Temperature" - Sean Paul
"Raging on a Sunday" - Bohnes
"Can't Stop Me Now" - Oh The Larceny
"Twisted" - MISSIO
"Play with Fire (feat. Yacht Money) - Sam Tinnesz
"Stronger" - The Score
"Don't" - Ed Sheeran

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PROLOGUE

"William, are you mad?" I hissed under my breath. "Take that money and return it. Pronto!" And in case he didn't understand the urgency in Italian, I added in English, "Right fucking now!"

What the hell was he thinking to take a damn money bag from the mafia? It didn't matter whether they left the bag behind by accident or not. I couldn't comprehend how someone would *forget* a bag full of money. Lots of money! It must have been a test. One that my husband and John, our best friend, failed. Big time!

The Morrelli family was known for their ruthlessness. Everyone feared them, despite the fact they moved in high social circles and among some of the most prestigious politicians. The fact of the matter was they ruled D.C. and Maryland with an iron fist. Dominico Morrelli was known as the Wolf for Christ's sake. He ripped people's throats out for crossing him. If that wasn't something to be feared, I didn't know what was.

"I didn't steal it, Bianca," my husband protested. His blonde hair was disheveled and wet from the rain. He was lucky to dock his boat without crashing against the pier. There was a storm coming, a hurricane nearing the

coastlines of the Maryland shores. It was one of the only downfalls of living in this area. That and how freaking expensive it was.

My eyes darted to John who looked just as soaked. Those two found a side gig transporting people back and forth across the bay. *Only once in a while*, they justified it.

Except, they weren't regular people. They were criminals. I ought to wring both of their necks. We were no match for the mafia.

"Don't look at me like that, Bee." John's hands raised in surrender, his whole appearance just as disheveled as my husband's. "Will is telling the truth. They left the bag behind. Finders, keepers."

I wanted to smack both of them for acting so childish.

"It doesn't work like that with the mafia," I argued in a hushed tone. The twins were sound asleep, and the last thing I needed right now was for them to wake up. It was a long day caring for them, along with the worry for my husband weighing me down. "They will kill us. All of us. You have to return the money!"

It was late May, and it constantly rained. Things were not looking up. Even this hurricane was a freak of nature. It wasn't even a hurricane season yet.

The rain pounded against the windows, the force of the wind howling making this whole situation even darker. I loved our house, but right now, it spooked me. We were so exposed with the French windows surrounding us. I felt like we were being watched from the bay by the underworld of Baltimore, ready to attack us.

Yes, my imagination was getting the best of me. Because nobody smart would be out on the bay in this weather. Not unless they had a death wish.

"They left the bag full of money behind." My husband was adamant about keeping the money. "It could be their way of paying for the service."

“William, they paid you and John already,” I pointed out the obvious to him. “That bag was forgotten. You cannot keep it.” I turned to John, who I've known as long as William. “John, those men are brutal. They won’t just kill us; they’ll kill our entire family. Everyone!”

He thought I was exaggerating, but all they had to do was read the articles in the papers and they’d realize how dangerous this was.

“If they call and bring it up, we’ll give it back,” John reasoned.

“What the hell were the two of you thinking? Getting involved with those people is a death sentence.”

“We need the money,” they both responded at the same time. “You know we need the money, babe.” My husband’s stubborn voice tried to make me see this whole situation his way. “They seem pretty decent, keeping to themselves and clean-cut suits. You should have seen Dominico Morrelli; he was in this very expensive suit. You’d never be able to tell he was a criminal.”

My heart shuddered with fear, and I exhaled shakily. Those two were in the same boat as Dominico Morrelli. They were lucky they came out of it alive. I couldn’t completely grasp the reason why these criminals were using someone else’s boat. It wasn’t as if Dominico Morrelli couldn’t afford a Grady White boat.

“Those guys don’t seem so bad,” John muttered, agreeing with my husband. Of course, he would agree even if William was wrong.

The Pope could proclaim those criminals saints and that would still not change my mind. Those mobsters were some of the worst men to walk this Earth. I had seen firsthand how they destroyed people, families.

John leaned over and pressed a kiss on my cheek. “We can talk about it all when the storm passes. I have to get to my place before it gets really bad.”

With a sigh, I nodded and walked him to the front door. “Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you over? Or stay the night here,” I suggested.

“Yes, positive.” He grabbed the umbrella and walked through the door, with me right behind him. “Try not to worry too much.”

He gave me one more smooch on my cheek and turned around, leaving me behind as he stepped out into the rain while opening the umbrella. He walked out into the dark, rain trickling down over the umbrella’s edges.

“Text us when you get home,” I called out to him. He didn’t turn around but just waved his hand in the air, acknowledging he would.

He lived only two streets over, but it would give us a peace of mind to know he confirmed he got home safely. Standing on the wide front stone porch, covered only by a little overhang, I watched John’s figure disappear through the rainy, dark night. As the rain poured and the wind howled, a feeling of dread slowly crept up my spine.

I didn’t have a good feeling about what they had done tonight. People didn’t just get away with taking a bag with hundreds of thousands of dollars like it was nothing.

From the corner of my eye, a light flickered over the water and my head whipped in its direction. Like a cigarette butt or a lighter. My eyes scanned the dark surface, the little drops of rain wetting my face. I saw something; I knew it wasn’t my overactive imagination. I held my breath, the sense of being watched increasing with each second. It sent fear and a shudder down my spine, sensing the dangers that lurked in the dark. Something or somebody was out there.

It’s just your imagination, I tried to convince myself. Everything that happened tonight made me paranoid.

But I couldn’t get rid of the feeling of being watched, my skin tingling with awareness. Thunder shuddered the earth, the sound of the waves violent against the shore.

“Bianca?” My husband’s voice came from behind me.

I jumped in fear, snapping my head in his direction. He stood right behind me on the porch, his hair still wet.

“You shouldn’t be out here,” I scolded him softly. “I don’t want you to catch a cold.”

His immune system was weak. Compromised, more like it. The treatments have barely started, but it was taking a toll on him.

“We are not giving that money back,” he uttered, that stubbornness I came to know well edged on his young face.

“William, we have to.” My voice cracked. I was scared. Scared of losing my husband. Scared of the mafia and their ruthlessness. Scared of consequences. “You know as well as I do, that money has to be returned. It’s not ours. You working with them is a mistake. Bad news.”

He shook his head in disagreement, but he knew I was right. It was in his eyes, along with the exhaustion of the last few months.

You’d never know my husband was gravely ill, his system fighting a deadly cancer. Not unless you’ve known him for as long as I have. Not unless you lived with him. He hid it, but he tired faster, slept harder, and barely ate.

“We need the money for treatments,” he reasoned. I could see he was tired; the cancer was slowly eating at his strength and his youth. He aged at least ten years in the last few months. His head tilted to the bag that still stood next to the door, where I insisted it stayed until they returned it. “And for you, in case, if I-”

“Don’t say it,” I whispered, my heart squeezing in my chest. “Don’t you fucking dare say it.”

“Baby, you know what the doctors said.”

Yes, I fucking knew what they said, but I refused to believe there was no hope. There had to be something that we could do. Hope still lingered in me, that he’d pull through. We still had so much to work out. We needed

another chance to make up for the time we'd allowed the distance to grow between us.

He has to pull through.

He came up to me, wrapped his arms around me. I buried my face into his chest, inhaling his scent while my throat constricted with sobs I kept in.

"Bianca, I want you to be taken care of," he whispered into my hair, his voice tired. "I want to make sure you and the girls are okay when I'm gone."

Sobs won the battle, and I buried my head into his chest as tears streamed down my face. "Don't talk like that," I begged, my voice hoarse. "Please, William. You have to get better. We can find a doctor that has a cure," I rasped shakily.

He wrapped me tightly into his arms, with the same strength he used to have, feeding my hope as he pressed his lips softly onto my forehead.

His kiss on my forehead was the first goodbye.

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Chapter One

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BIANCA

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Sixteen months later

Greece is nice this time of year.
The skies are blue.
And the seas are stormy.

The words swirled through my head like an eerie children's song in a horror movie. The fear was almost a paralyzing thought of what would follow them if I ever heard it aloud. Although at this very moment, I craved blue skies and just a little hope.

I rushed through the streets, a light drizzle making this afternoon wet and slightly chilly. Finding parking was such a pain in the city. By the time I finally found it, I was a few blocks away from the meeting spot. I lived only an hour from Washington D.C., but I rarely came to the city anymore. I preferred the suburbs with less congestion and less people. Especially lately. I didn’t care to be around anyone, except for my girls.

It had been fifteen months, three weeks, and five days since I lost my husband. Never in a million years had I thought I'd be a widow at twenty-six. I was told my life had

barely begun, but lately, it was as if my life ended. I felt anxious, exhausted, and alone.

It was mid-September and the recent weather mostly consisted of rain, very much reflective of my melancholic mood. It was as if it had been raining since the day William died. Even sunny days seemed gloomy, overcast with clouds that seemed to follow me everywhere.

Glancing up at the building, I noted the rendezvous spot with my girlfriend, Angie. She convinced me this was a good idea, just to get away for a bit and have a little break from the twins. I wasn't so sure.

The last fifteen months had been hard. I barely socialized anymore. Scratch that, I didn't socialize at all. I avoided any and all events. Even the pre-K ones from the girls' school. For a multitude of reasons. I was aware I withdrew more and more into my own thoughts and found too much comfort in my routine. It was a miracle Angie convinced me to meet her. But then, she'd always had that personality to pull you out. It was one of her biggest assets - if only she would see it in herself.

Since William's death, I lost touch with a lot of my friends… even John. Especially him. I hadn't decided yet if I was protecting him or myself. He stopped the ridiculous side gig the moment my husband died. Which was right after that dreadful night. Neither one of them was called again.

To them it meant they got away with it.

To me it signified they had, I couldn't even think their name, realized William and John couldn't be trusted.

My seclusion was a combination of my grief and fear of the consequences from that stormy night, just a few weeks before William's death. It rendered me paranoid. Grief and paranoia were a deadly combination, if you asked me. The only thing that kept me sane were my twins, and the routine I got my life into.

Either way, here I was, back in the social world. So, I might as well get it over with. Hopefully, she wouldn't nag me for another few months to hang out again. Glancing at the clock on the side of the building, I marked the time.

"Not too bad," I mumbled to myself as I pushed through the glass door of The Lafayette, an overly fancy restaurant. Speaking out loud had become a side effect of no adult interaction. "Only five minutes late."

Ignoring the presence behind me, I smoothed my hair and my shirt, aware that I didn't look my best. My hair was damp from the drizzle. My mood was damp too, but I wouldn't go there now.

Glancing down at my state of appearance, I frowned. It wasn't meant for this restaurant where everyone looked pristine. I was wearing a pair of white jeans with a pink t-shirt and a pair of pink chucks. I thought it was an adequate wardrobe for lunch, but I realized now that I was underdressed.

Nothing I can do about it now, I told myself*.*

I skimmed around the restaurant, searching through people. This place mostly consisted of men in suits. And a few women in Chanel dresses. According to Angie, the rich and powerful ate here. Exactly what I wasn't in the mood for. I couldn't blame my friend's determination to marry well. After all, financial stability was important.

Angie pretty much screened her boyfriends. She and John used to be an item, until she determined he wasn't rich enough. It wasn't as if he was poor, but she had much bigger aspirations and standards.

Her words, not mine.

I just wanted my mortgage paid and a loving husband. Everything else I could figure out somehow. I lost a loving husband, and the unpaid mortgage was looming over my head. Seems neither one of us was getting what we wanted. *Yep, life is a bitch*.

Angie told me once that in order to survive a lifelong marriage, she needed lots of money, so if she needed to get away, she could. She was right about one thing; marriages were hard and required a lot of work. And forgiveness. The latter was hard, but mistakes were bound to happen in a relationship. The question was how big would they be, and where the limit was for forgiveness. Oddly enough, the complications of life somehow didn't register despite all the glaring signs everywhere.

Money, love, forgiveness, heartaches, danger.

Maybe Angie had issues that nobody knew about as well. God knew I did. Angie and I grew up in similar neighborhoods. It wasn't as if we went without, but sometime in high school, money became the most important thing in her life. After going through the hell of the last two years, I couldn't quite argue with her point of view anymore.

It is one of the most important things in anyone's life, but I didn't learn that lesson until William's illness.

Life was a fuckery. A widow at twenty-six, four-year-old twins to care for, on the verge of bankruptcy, and a foreclosure threatening. So no, I couldn't argue with her on the importance of money and a husband that had all the right kind of assets. It just seemed I had no stomach to do the same.

Spotting her waving at me with a wide smile on her face, I rushed forward towards her. Her beautiful blonde hair fell loose to her mid-back. It made me feel even less adequate. My mind was just as frazzled as my current state of hair and wardrobe.

I continued towards her table in the furthest corner of the room when the waiter stopped me.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he stepped in front of me and lightly pressed a palm against my shoulder. His damn uniform looked more expensive and put together than my

outfit today. “This is a private club, and it’s for members only.”

Immediately, more than one pair of eyes darted to me, eyeing me like an imposter. *So much for trying to be invisible!*

“I got that, but…”

He cut me off. “No exceptions,” he retorted, stepping closer to me. His voice sounded snarky and superior to my ears, making me feel insignificant.

Instinctively, I stepped back and slammed into a wall. Glancing over my shoulder, I realized it was not a wall. It was a tall, broad man with raven black hair, an arrogant mouth with full sensual lips, and a square jaw that spoke of determination. Shifting my body so I could see him better, my breath hitched. This man was beautiful. Hard and beautiful!

My gaze skimmed over his hard, beautiful face until I connected with his cold gray stare. Eyes a mix of stormy clouds and dark, thick lashes that would be every woman’s envy. He gave the impression of a clean-cut business man, but his posture, his eyes, spoke more of dominance and harshness. Their depths held cruelty and indifference, sending a shiver right through me.

Who is he? An unfamiliar feeling ran through me in his presence. I had a sense that I had seen him before. I ***know*** I’ve seen him before, but where? He wasn’t a man you would ever forget. He was the type to make your panties melt and your heart race.

My gaze traveled over his rock solid chest in the dark, three piece suit. His clothes were expensive and sharp. It had to be custom-made because it fit his strong body, accentuating his towering frame. His entire outfit was just a disguise. This man didn’t give a shit about anyone’s opinion, or what they thought of him. He was a wolf disguised in a polished Armani suit.

Lurking right around his shirt collar, there was a hint of ink. Either that or my imagination played tricks on me. I found myself leaning into him, drawn to him, realizing too late what I was doing. I continued staring at him, unable to move.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered under my breath. It had been a long time since I came face-to-face with someone who made my pulse flutter. And this guy…. geez, he was making me go all cross-wired. He was ruthlessness all dressed up in his expensive dark suit, towering over me and threatening to swallow me whole. Yet, my body kept inching closer to him.

As if he was my gravity.

With startling realization, I felt his fingers curl around my upper arm, and my eyes locked on his big hand around my arm, clear of ink, but right at his cufflink, I swore again there was a tattoo playing peekaboo with me.

Taking a step back, I put some much needed distance between us, his closeness rattling me to my core.

“No problem,” he said, his voice deep and velvety. I kept finding my gaze traveling to his face, undoubtedly carved from hard granite, that somehow spoke of an assassin; a man that could just as easily kill you as kiss you. And I’d bet my life he could kiss well.

Why am I thinking about kissing? I scolded myself.

As he allowed the distance between us, my body actually missed him; the need for him was so strong that I had to fight the urge to reach out to him again. I wanted to lean into him, feel his heat.

What was it about this man that caused this reaction to stir? Yes, he was handsome, strong, and more than a little scary, and the warning ringing inside my head should have been enough to send me running. Maybe it was also the sense of protection and safety that I picked up on that had me halting in my tracks.

“Mr. Morrelli,” the waiter greeted him, his voice distant through the fog of my thoughts, and it felt like an ice shower. I’d recognize that last name anywhere, heavy dread pooled in my stomach like acid. He called him Mr. Morrelli.

No, it cannot be!

Destiny wouldn’t be so cruel to throw a Morrelli criminal my way, on my first outing. Actually, the last name was quite common. It was my first time out and about in the city since William’s death. I was being paranoid. *Right?*

My body kicked into a hyperactive awareness mode and self-preservation. Regardless of who this man was or wasn’t, if he was in any way connected to the Morrelli crime family, he was dangerous.

Instinctively, I stumbled two extra steps backwards, putting as much space as possible between the two of us; my eyes never wavered from him, treating him like a potential threat.

My brain warned and sirens blasted off. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. My father had always told me to trust my instincts. Well, my instincts screamed at me, telling me to watch out. This man was trouble I didn’t need.

But my body, why did it want to submit? *To him!*

Shifting my eyes up his face again, I noted his dark hair and hint of the same color scruff. I curled my fingers by my side, to stop them from reaching out. They actually itched to feel the scruff on his face, his skin under my fingertips. My skin instantly flushed.

I met his eyes, as if searching his knowledge in them and forgot everyone around me as I drowned in the gaze of his dark steel eyes, dangers lurking in them.

He couldn’t be ***the*** very criminal I feared. But in my experience, usually what you see is ***not*** what you get. Look at my mother! My biological father!

“Go away,” Angie’s voice got me out of my stupor as I glanced away from the man and in search of my friend who was glaring at the waiter. “She’s with me,” she added in a shrill voice.

I shook my head, the need to warn her not to talk to this guy like that on the tip of my tongue. This man was dangerous.

“Hello, Mr. Nico Morrelli,” she purred before I could warn her. My head whipped around, and I followed her gaze to the man behind me.

Nico Morrelli?

Oh my God! Surely it couldn’t be! I mean, what were the odds?

My eyes darted between the two. *Do not panic! Do not jump to conclusions.*

Fuck that, there were no conclusions to draw. *Nico Morrelli!*

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Chapter Two

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BIANCA

"Angie, maybe we should go somewhere else," I suggested to Angie, barely finding my voice and glancing down at my outfit again. I sure as hell couldn't tell her I didn't want to be around this guy. The same city was too close. My inadequate clothing was a good reason to go somewhere else, away from *him*.

With a pointed look at Angie, I pleaded with her to go along. Yet she seemed to be oblivious to my hints. Of course she was dressed in a business skirt suit, but she still managed to pull off provocative. Maybe it was the vibrant red skirt that made it flirtier than a business professional.

"I'm not really dressed for this place," I choked out. Shit, I'd lose my shit any second. I sensed panic rise within me, my breathing slightly hitched and pulse speeding up.

"No, don't be silly!" she objected, her eyes eating up the man next to me. "How are you, Mr. Morrelli?"

Groaning inwardly, I wished she'd stop. This was the wrong kind of man to be associated with. Why did she have to throw herself at men? Especially this one. Yes, I felt some semblance of attraction, but I had enough sense to fight it.

"Angie," he greeted her in a deep voice, and it was terrifying that it sent shivers to the marrow in my bones.

His eyes remained glued on me, like he was seeing everything. I swallowed hard, suddenly having a hard time functioning. The way he studied me, as if he searched through his memories for something. Or maybe he already knew and was contemplating how to kill me.

No, no, no!

It couldn't be the same Dominico Morrelli. This guy was nothing like the description I got from William. I thought William said he was his height and average looking. This guy was clearly taller than my late husband and definitely not average looking.

I swallowed hard, deep down knowing that this man was in fact the infamous Dominico Morrelli, head of the Morrelli crime family. The man my husband stole from. *Shit.*

Double shit!

Inhaling deeply and then slowly exhaling, I tried to calm my heart rate. I shifted uncomfortably, and with each second that went by, my anxiety rose, choking me with anguish and fear.

This guy is here just as a businessman, I gave myself a pep talk. *Not as a mobster. He doesn't know who I am. He won't kill you in broad daylight.*

"Ma'am, you are not dressed per code," the waiter objected, pulling me out of my thoughts. There was no doubt that he was talking about me. Fuck proper dress code when there was a mobster within my sight. Wasn't there a code against mobsters eating in this damn club?

"Angie, let's just go to Starbucks," I tried again, pleading in a nervous voice. I was half tempted to yell at her, but that would bring more unwanted attention. I didn't want to be here, and so many eyes already on me made me even more anxious. In particular, the eyes of the man that rattled me with just his stare.

"The lady is with me," Nico Morrelli cut him off, clearly expecting to get his way. "She'll sit at my table." My eyes locked on his strong jaw and full lips, a determination

firmly etched in there. This man got what he wanted. *Always.* I knew it as well as my own name.

My eyes darted in slight panic to Angie then back to him. This was going from bad to worse, fast. I didn't have to wonder whether Angie wanted to sit at his table. She was practically drooling over him. If none of us were here, she might have even jumped his bones.

Damn it to all hell! I didn't want to sit at his table. My sixth sense screamed ***danger*** although my body warmed under his gaze. I should flee now - every fiber in me urged me to run and hide. Before he realized who I was.

"Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Morrelli," Angie gushed at him, and a small part of me wanted to smack her. *Not because I am jealous,* I told myself. But *to wake her up from the drooling session.*

"I don't…" my voice shook slightly, and I cleared my throat. "We don't want to impose. Thank you for the offer but-"

"Don't be ridiculous," Angie cut me off. "We would love to, Mr. Morrelli." She practically purred, and I half expected her to start rubbing herself all over him. Ugh, if she started that, I was definitely leaving. I didn't need to see that, though I was half tempted to feel his body against mine.

I'm a grieving widow. I only want William.

I took a deep breath, trying to hold on to my calmness. These conflicting feelings - fear and attraction - were pulling at me, stretching me in the opposite direction. I couldn't recall the last time a man made me so nervous, making my body warm under his gaze. And those eyes of his watching me… *seeing* me. I had to remain invisible.

I couldn't afford to be seen. If the mafia knew-

Stop it, Bianca! Those thoughts would only increase my paranoia and anxiety. *Just keep it together, and he'll never know,* I lied to myself.

“Wonderful,” the waiter settled it for us. “We have your regular table ready Mr. Morrelli. Your guest is already there.”

Great, a guest too. Another mobster? Nico Morrelli motioned for me to go in front of him, and I reluctantly followed behind the waiter. My neck itched sensing his gaze on my back and the feeling was unsettling. Angie looked over the moon about the turn of events.

Me… not so much. I had the urge to turn around and run. Did all the mafia men move in the same circles? I didn’t know, but there was one thing I was certain of. Drawing unwanted attention would be bad right now. Really bad!

Maybe I could… I wasn’t sure what. Hide? Disappear? Pack up the girls and hit the road? Without any money, it would be hard to hide.

No, I couldn’t bring any attention to myself. The best thing was to lay low and not make any sudden moves. I didn’t want to bring Benito King’s attention to myself or my girls. His attention was elsewhere, and I’d like for it to stay like that.

Benito King ran the underworld on the East Coast, trafficked women and facilitated the sale of belles among the worst mobsters. He and his son Marco were some of the cruelest mobsters to ever walk the earth. They kidnapped and sold girls, of any age, to unscrupulous men that tortured them and used them any way they wished.

If he knew William and I stole money from the mafia, Benito’s men would drag me and my daughters into their world kicking and screaming. Mom always said he was good at changing the rules to suit himself. There was a deal though, and she paid the price. She warned me to always keep away from any connections to the criminal underworld and people in it. And I intended to heed my mother’s warning.

Otherwise, my life would officially become hell. Not only that - my actions would make my daughters targets. All the sacrifices by my mom, dad, and my grandmother would have been for naught.

Painfully aware of the man's presence behind me, my heart thundered wildly in a combination of fear and… excitement? No; it couldn't be. It must be all fear, messing around with my brain and my sanity.

Right before William's death, John warned me not to go around the Morrelli's, saying they were bad news. There was so much bad news in my life, I didn't really need any more.

Although, I had to scoff at my best friend's advice. If he knew the Morrellis were bad news, why would he and William do any business with them. Yes, we were desperate, but so much so we wished for death? And dealing with the mafia always ended in death.

I glanced at Angie and she seemed to be gushing over Nico Morrelli, peeking at him under her lashes, trying to show him she was interested. Even a blind person wouldn't have missed those signs. To her, he filled her checkboxes. He was filthy rich, powerful, and handsome. She just had to add one more box - dangerous.

Nervously, I threw a glance his way. He was older than I expected, maybe in his forties, and there was something about him that was elusive. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Yes, the Morrelli famiglia ruled the underworld of Maryland and D.C. for a few generations, but there was a ruthless edge about Nico Morrelli that screamed he earned it and squashed a few people on his way to the top. Maybe even more than just a few!

I had no basis for it, but I'd stake my life that my gut feeling was spot on. It usually was. It was what warned me that something went on with my husband before I ever realized what he had gotten himself into.

“Here you go.” The waiter’s voice startled me. He changed his rude behavior towards me immediately, just because I was in this man’s company. It was beyond fake. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

He was asking me, but the question was directed to the man I was painfully aware standing behind me. I shook my head just the same. The sooner this waiter left, the sooner I could put distance between Nico Morrelli and me.

My eyes shifted across the restaurant, and I noted we had the best table here with the view of the Washington Monument wide open in front of us. While other tables were crammed closer together to fill this place to its capacity, this one was away from them all, affording it privacy. Of course, it would be expected that Nico Morrelli would get the best of everything.

There was another gentleman already seated at the table, waiting for us. I couldn’t help but groan inwardly. These men were exactly what Angie loved. Handsome, rich, clearly established, and powerful. Was this man a criminal too? From the two, Nico Morrelli gave off the vibe of dominance and power, accustomed to getting his way. The other one, not so much.

My first outing since my husband’s death and this freaking happens. I would be stuck in an uncomfortable situation with a guy that sent fearful shivers down my back and another that leered at me like I was on display. No wonder I decided to be a hermit. After today, I was reverting back to avoiding everyone.

“Hello.” Angie now batted her lashes at Mr. Morrelli’s friend, and I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. He seemed younger but nowhere nearly as attractive. Not that either one of the men’s attractiveness mattered to me. He stood up immediately, his eyes darting to me then his friend behind me.

“Hello, Gabito,” Mr. Morrelli spoke up behind me. “I hope you don’t mind these lovely ladies joining us.”

Ugh, I minded. I bit my tongue to hold the words back. I wanted to leave, *now*.

“Of course not, Dominico,” Gabito responded and his eyes traveled from his friend to me. Fucking *Dominico Morrelli!* So much for *no chance in hell* or a coincidence. “And you are?” he asked, curiosity in his eyes as he watched me.

Clearing my throat uncomfortably, I rasped out my answer. “Bianca.”

I purposely withheld my last name. My heart raced, beating hard against my ribs, and I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. I pushed my hair out of my face nervously, my hands visibly trembling. I shouldn’t have come. I should have remained stuck in my little routine. Then I wouldn’t have run into Dominico Morrelli.

A true terror rushed through my veins; my pulse throbbing with adrenaline.

Calm down. Inhale and exhale. Calm down.

I kept trying to pep talk myself. Nobody knew what happened. Nobody came searching for that money. Nobody but the three of us knew what we had done, and one was dead. I trusted John explicitly, so that meant our secret was safe.

No, not just the three of us. Whoever lost that bag knew it too.

John gave his portion of the *stolen* money to William. I guess he hoped it would buy him the cure, just as I did. We were both stupid. The doctors kept saying there was no saving him, but I refused to believe it. But none of that would matter to the mafia. They would kill John knowing he didn’t keep a dime of that money.

But Morrelli’s men never came looking for it; I justified it to myself. Maybe they had so many money bags, they never even missed it. Shit, dealing with these consequences might just result in a heart attack.

Shifting my eyes around, I realized again I stuck out like a sore thumb, evidence that I did not belong here. Angie stood out in a good way; I stood out in the worst way. She already sat herself at the table, and I could have just strangled her for being so inconsiderate at this moment. Or for picking the place where mobsters came to eat.

I stood there debating if I should just say to hell with it and turn around to leave. Or would that bring unwanted attention to myself? These paranoid thoughts were never part of me until William got involved with the mafia. Even after I learned the big secret my mother harbored, I felt sure it would never be exposed. Because it was successfully kept for twenty-five years. But stealing money from the mafia was something entirely different.

A man's hand on my lower back gently nudged me forward, causing me to jump at the searing touch and shockwaves detonating through my body. I whipped my head back, meeting the gray eyes that scared the shit out of me.

"I apologize," his deep voice seeped through every pore as he removed his hand. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"That's fine," I murmured in a raspy voice, fascinated and scared by the depth of his eyes. Today was the first time I had been touched by a man since the death of my husband. By Nico Morrelli. And his touch… it was burning hot, and even now that his hand was no longer on me, I could still feel the searing sensation where it had laid. It wasn't really what I expected.

Oh, this is bad! My panicked state of mind warned me while my body craved another taste of his touch.

What. The. Hell?

I didn't want this man. I would never want this man. *Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

"C'mon, Bianca. Sit down."

Reluctantly, I put my purse on the back of the chair as Nico pulled it out for me. *Gentleman and a mobster,* I

silently scoffed in my head. *What a fucking joke!*

I murmured my thanks and sat down, avoiding his eyes. It was best not to capture any of his attention. Just get through this lunch, and it'd be over. He'd forget me, and I'd pretend I never met him. Great plan!

Yet I knew there was no chance in hell I'd ever forget this intimidating, overwhelming, good looking man. Tall and handsome, well-built and olive-skinned with a dangerous and intimidating aura. My mind couldn't comprehend why I found him good looking, he was nothing like William.

William, my husband!

God, I missed him. Despite all the hardships and pain, I still missed him with an ache that felt hollow in my chest. He should have never died so young, robbed of his life that had barely just started.

Instead, here I was sitting with a perfect stranger and a mobster, pretending life was fine, things were normal, and I wasn't scared out of my mind. Albeit, unbeknownst to me, my life wasn't normal from the second my mother conceived me. I could pretend all I wanted, but the fact remained, I was the biological daughter of a fucking evil monster.

Taking a deep breath in and then exhaling shakily, I worked to calm my thoughts and my heart rate, then tried to focus on the conversation, but all my senses were completely jumbled.

I have never been one for making small talk, so I just sat there stiffly, watching Nico and his friend while Angie kept talking. I couldn't pick a word she said; although I did pick up on her flirting with both men.

Glancing at the wall clock, I prayed the service was fast because I couldn't wait to get out of here.

Painfully aware of Nico Morrelli's eyes on me, I kept my expression unmoving. Could he see I didn't belong? Did he know who I was? Or was it something else?

Shifting uncomfortably, I glanced around me. The million dollar view of this country's Capital with ruthless men having a front seat. What did that tell me? Everything around me screamed money, danger, power. None of it was my world and should have never been my world.

I returned my eyes to our table and noticed both men watching me. I forced a smile. I was so out of my element, not only clothes or situation wise. I had been wrapped up in my home life for the last six years. I was perfectly happy enjoying my little hobby and being a wife.

My childhood has given me a drive to succeed in the motherhood and spouse department. My mother wasn't given a chance to be a mother nor a wife. Instead, she sacrificed herself to protect me, just as I was trying to do the same now with my girls.

"Bianca?" Angie's hand on my arm startled me back to now.

"Yes?" My eyes darted between three individuals, my fake smile hurting my cheeks.

"Are you alright?" Her voice was slightly worried. Right! Now she was worried. She should have taken my hint earlier that I didn't want to be here.

"Yes, yes," I answered. "Of course. What's up?"

"Mr. Morrelli and Gabito recommended we try the lobster burger," she chirped happily, gushing at the two men. "Mr. Morrelli asked if you are ok with it."

My eyes went to Nico Morrelli. I wondered why Angie kept calling him Mr. Morrelli, and she was already on a first name basis with Gabito. Maybe she could sense the predator lurking under that suit, just like I could. As I stared into Nico's dark steel gaze, I had the urge to either drown in them or squeeze my eyes shut and pretend I was anywhere but here. Because there was no doubt that this man reeked of ruthlessness. He could destroy me with a snap of his fingers.

The mafia was an unfamiliar world to me, but I knew enough about it to know to stay away. It started with my mother, the stories by my Italian grandmother, and ended with the latest experience with my late husband.

I shook my head. “No, I’ll just have a salad,” I told them. “I’m not that hungry.”

And I can’t afford a lobster burger, I added silently.

“Don’t be silly,” Angie objected. “You look like you are ready to wither away. What have you lost, like twenty pounds since your husband’s funeral?”

Pain pierced through my chest at the reminder of William’s loss. It wasn’t the only reason I lost weight. It was like the entire deck of cards came crumbling down in the span of a few months, destroying all the foundations that my grandmother and dad gave me. It all started with my father’s death, about a year before William’s.

The truths I learned shook me to the core. It turned out I wasn’t who I thought I was. I wasn’t even sure who I was anymore.

My mobster father! Benito King.

He was feared among the criminals, never mind anyone else. The truth was bitter on my tongue. The revelation… better yet, damnation tasted sour, even now. What would have William said if he had known before he died? It was the one secret I kept from him. He didn’t need my cross to bear too. Besides, I couldn’t think of that man as my father. He was just a sperm donor. I had a father, a real father that raised and protected me.

“No,” I responded, my voice slightly trembling. Annoyance at Angie, at this situation, at the secrets I worked hard to forget bubbled up inside me.

I gripped my fingers around my glass of water but was scared to pick it up and spill it. The feeling of loneliness I felt on the day I buried my husband came back. Despite our disagreements, I missed having someone I could talk to. We were friends long before we became lovers. *Death comes in*

three, they said. I tended to believe it might have been a true superstition. My grandmother passed away three years ago, my father followed the year after, and William the year after him.

Now, I felt more alone amongst crowds of people than when I was alone. Yes, the fear kept me back too, but so did the sense of being unable to connect with others.

“Actually, I’m sorry.” I stood up abruptly, grabbing my purse. I couldn’t bear sitting here during lunch, pretending everything was fine when my life has been slowly but consistently falling apart. I couldn’t stay around this mobster and keep my cool for much longer. “I just remembered I have to be somewhere. Um… for the girls.”

“What?” Angie’s eyes stared at me in shock. “You said your mother-in-law would take the twins for the afternoon and you are free. I took the rest of the afternoon off.”

I shook my head, glancing between three of them, and focusing on Angie as I told her, “I’m really sorry, Angie. Next time.”

Without a backward glance, I rushed through the restaurant. I heard Angie call out to me, but I didn’t stop. She wouldn’t come after me. I knew her well enough to be sure of it.

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Chapter Three

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NICO

I watched her rush out of the restaurant, leaving us all behind. I couldn't remember the last time a woman left without a backward glance at me... at least not willingly. Usually, they had to be pushed out when I was done with them.

Bianca! Beautiful name, and it fit her perfectly. Hell, might as well have named her Snow White. She'd fit the part to a tee. Her face was pale as snow and her ruby red lips and dark hair along with those eyes were a stark contrast against her complexion. Beautiful indeed!

I wanted her. And what I want, I always get. I gave her a free pass the first time I spotted her, when I didn't know who she was. Now, the circumstances have changed. I'd use her to extract my revenge, fuck her, and then ensure she was taken care of for the rest of her life. It was an ideal scenario.

In my experience, falling in love tended to be a clusterfuck. All you had to do was look at Luciano who had been hunting for his wife for years and was in Italy right now collecting her.

My parents' marriage taught me that marrying for love could destroy you. My father was a weak prick that cost my sister her life. While my mother spiraled out of control after

her death, she wasn’t much better beforehand. My father’s infidelities and skirt chasing, very much like Benito King’s, caused havoc in her previously perfect life. She was the only daughter of the famous Cassidy real estate tycoon. My father was a greedy bastard that liked to prey on wealthy and beautiful women. Unfortunately, my mother fell for it without seeing his true colors until it was way too late. Marriages in our world were for life. Nicoletta, my sister, paid the ultimate price. Bianca Carter was the first piece of the puzzle in avenging her death.

I sensed fear rolling off her when Angie told her my name. Fear mixed with desperation. Despite her composure, Bianca wasn’t good at hiding her feelings. I wondered how much she knew about the mafia or what her husband had done.

Did she know who I was? Usually, women knew the Morrelli's vast real estate portfolio and flocked for the wealth we represented. My legitimate business and wealth kept me out of the news and off the radar. I have tripled the real estate portfolio and built an information technology company that I used in both my legal and illegal activities. The latter was what led me to Bianca.

When I laid the trap for her husband, it seemed William Carter and his wife knew nothing of the mafia. Could I have been wrong? The way she watched me with a guarded expression made me believe her fear was connected to my underworld activities. Although I struggled to comprehend how she would ever know. She wasn’t part of any of it and had very little contact with her mother. Yet if Bianca knew more than I suspected, it would certainly explain her fear.

She didn’t seem like a woman that would have been eager to jump into underworld activities. But my sixth sense warned me to keep my guard up because there was something else going on with this woman. And I have learned to trust my instincts. It was what kept me alive in

the underworld and made me a worthy opponent in all my businesses, legitimate and illegitimate.

“Shouldn’t you go after your friend?” I asked Angie. A true friend would have left us behind and ensured her friend was alright. It told me those two were not close friends.

“Oh, I’ve known Bianca since we were kids,” she brushed it off. “When she doesn’t want to be bothered, she shuts off the entire world. There could be a new world war on her front step and she’d still insist on being left alone.”

Definitely not close friends. Just as well, because I didn’t particularly like Angie Hartman.

“Does Bianca have a last name?” I asked her, though I knew it. In the past three years, I have learned all there was about Bianca and her life.

“Bianca Carter,” she replied, slightly reluctant.

William Carter. He was the only man that dared to steal from me and got away with it. Well, technically he didn’t get away with it. Death found him, but he certainly never paid the money back. And with interest, he now owed me millions. Better yet, his widow did.

The trap I laid out for Bianca’s husband worked out better than I could have ever hoped for. It was my way to get to Bianca Carter, to make her husband indebted to me. And now, the debt was hers, and there was only one way to settle it. She’d be my revenge.

Mine to own.

“Bianca swore off dating,” Angie continued on, the purr insinuating I had no chance with her friend, but she herself was more than willing. The way she looked between Gabito and I told me she wouldn’t be opposed to both of us fucking her.

No way in hell. I would never be even remotely interested in Angie. She was a misguided young woman that was after money and status. She was smart, but none of that would help her in her conquest of the men she was

after. Most of those men were married or had arrangements with other women from our social circles. It ensured they didn't get wrapped up with gold diggers.

But Bianca Carter on the other hand.

Yes, I would be interested. Not to share but to own. My eyes traveled across the restaurant. The woman was gone, not a trace of her, except for a light scent of her lingering perfume of lilacs. She disappeared as quickly as she entered my life.

Bianca Carter would be mine. To own. To possess. To destroy.

She just didn't know it yet.

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Chapter Four

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BIANCA

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Two Weeks Later

My twins played in our yard, the beautiful Chesapeake Bay view spread for miles in front of my eyes, the sound of waves and boats a distant noise among my girls' laughter. The unique smell of the bay invaded my lungs and mixed with the hollow pain that lingered in my chest.

I don't want to lose our home too.

Gibson Island gave the appearance of seclusion and privacy; it was my dream location to raise my little family. I fell in love with this house from the moment I saw it. It didn't matter to me that it was only a shack when I spotted it. All I saw was potential in a prime location. William and I had put so much work into it. We camped in the living room for months while we slowly renovated the house.

My heart twitched in my chest. I should be scouting for apartments that I could afford, not staring out to the sea, unable to move or act.

I failed them. In another four weeks, their life would be turned upside down.

Today that dreaded letter finally came. It has been part of my nightmares for months now. I knew it was coming, but it was still a shock to see the foreclosure letter from the bank with the deadline by which we have to move out. Gosh, if only I had some of that money that William took.

I'd probably use it to buy us some more time here, despite the fact I shook for days after running into Nico Morrelli.

That last month of William's life, I took any money I could get my hands on. Even the dirty money he stole. I refused to give up, chasing any treatment and hope of keeping him with me… with us. Financially, we were completely unprepared for his illness and death.

Would I have made William and John return the money if we had another chance? That was the scary part. Initially, I insisted they return it, but then when I realized William needed it for his medical treatments, I never brought it up again. I was almost positive that I would have probably used that dirty money, even knowing the outcome would have been the same. William would have died either way. But it was only due to that money that my girls and I got a few extra weeks with my husband, and that made it all worth it. After his death, the punishment came.

Karma was a damn bitch if you asked me.

I took a job just to be able to afford to put food on the table. We were left with no savings and a little sum from the life insurance policy barely paid for funeral costs. With very little experience behind me, I couldn't be picky and took the first job that paid decently. So here I was, playing secretary in a little law firm, trying to get by and failing miserably.

As long as we are together, we can handle everything. I kept repeating it over and over again. It just didn't make me feel any better.

I had been working so hard to keep it together since William died. It made no difference. I still failed. Turns out, I didn't realize how bad my financial dependence on him was until he was gone. It wouldn't have mattered if the mortgage was half of what it was, I still wouldn't be able to afford it along with property taxes on my salary. I was so desperate that I considered calling my mother.

But then I reminded myself where that could lead. There was a reason we rarely talked. She had sacrificed a lot already. She didn’t need another thing added to her plate.

Mom was Benito King’s mistress. My childhood was complicated. I rarely saw my mother growing up. I haven't seen her in a long time, but I did catch a picture of her and Benito King in the papers a while back. There was another man in the picture, Benito’s son. He looked just as cruel as his father - Marco King. He had some sick tendencies and his cruelty matched his father’s. At least that was what the papers said.

Mom had colored her blonde hair red and was on Benito’s arm, smiling happily. It was a fake smile though. The light in her beautiful blue eyes was slowly extinguishing. All because of ***him***. I didn’t see my mother much, but I knew her well enough to know her happy smile from a fake one. Her whole persona was fake - what Benito wanted her to be.

God, I couldn’t even remember the last time I saw her happy. I wanted to save her; I just didn’t know how. I couldn’t even save myself and my girls from eviction. How in the hell would I have saved my mother from Benito’s clutches?

Sometimes I wondered how she could do it - be around a man so cruel. Even though she was doing it for me, everyone had a breaking point. And she had endured so much over the years. Was her breaking point coming or had she reached it already? It devastated me to imagine what she had to endure for so long.

“Women of our family are strong,” my grandmother’s voice echoed in my head. “We fight and we never give up. In the end, we always prevail.”

I had to remember that. The protection my family enveloped me in made me depend on them, but I had to get my shit together and step up.

From what I had learned, Benito King used my mother when he wanted something or needed her body. It made my stomach churn and despite the fact that he was my biological father, I wanted to stab him through his black heart. I wouldn't mind watching him suffer and bleed, a long and painful death.

Mom expected him to be tired of her, but somehow that never happened. I loved my mother, but sometimes it was hard to understand her reasoning when I was a kid. None of it made sense to me - until my father revealed the truth on his deathbed. It would seem shit always came out during those last moments.

Honestly, I wasn't even sure who my mother was or whether she even knew who she was. She has been Benito's puppet for so long, I believed she'd lost herself. I mean, how could you not? In order to survive that man, you had to go under.

Being around the mafia kills all the joy out of a woman's life, my grandmother would say. She would know, too, since she left her family in Italy exactly for that reason. She wanted a normal life in the land of the free, only to see her own daughter and family fall into the same world she attempted to escape. Talk about fucking irony.

I learned early on in my childhood the reason I couldn't see Mom whenever I wanted was because of some fucked up agreement. The story was that Mom got pregnant before she had to be given in the Belles and Mobsters agreement. I didn't like it, but I bought it. I didn't learn the specifics of it until much, much later. The phrase *the devil is in the details* has never been truer. I learned that Benito King was my biological dad and that I was the owed generation in the fucked up agreement when my dad passed. Or the man I believed to be my father until I learned otherwise. Except she traded her place, so I wouldn't be part of the agreement. So, it skipped to my girls.

Obviously, we all bought the fabricated truth, including me and Benito King. *Thank God.* I couldn't have imagined growing up with him as a father. Unlike Benito, the man my mother loved was caring and selfless. He was the best father any little girl could wish for. He taught me how to fix cars, how to survive in the wilderness, how to shoot, and even how to stab a man. My grandmother taught me how to cook and bake, and sew; although she claimed I should give up the latter.

I could remember the hurtful look in my mother's eyes when I'd tell her everything I'd done with Grandma and Dad. I couldn't understand it, until much, much later. There had to be a way I could help her.

Although she had never been a constant in my life, I couldn't forsake her, knowing what she had done for me. I loved her, and I knew she loved me. After all, she had given her life for me. I could still remember those few times she'd come to see me, begging her to stay, but I knew she couldn't. My grandmother's tears as she walked her out. I rarely talked to Mom anymore. The twins were four now, and she had yet to meet them. After Dad passed away, I knew why. I finally understood.

Greece is nice this time of year.

The skies are blue.

And the seas are stormy.

When I was a little girl, she'd read me books about the ancient Greek Gods. I was so fascinated by it that she taught me a phrase that would become our own code. She drilled it into me. If she ever told me *Greece is nice this time of year*, it meant I had to scream and run so bad men couldn't get me. As I got older, it became something different. It meant I had to run and hide.

My mother was even now protecting me and my daughters.

Both Grandma and Mom were right though. Benito King wasn't a man to bring children around. My family protected

me; it was time I learned how to protect my girls.

The image of Nico Morrelli in his pristine dark suit flashed in my mind. I took a measured breath, hoping to calm myself. He didn't know me. He couldn't know. If he did, I'd be dead already. It had been three weeks since that dreadful day. For a whole week afterwards, I panicked every time I saw an unfamiliar vehicle in our neighborhood. I kept waiting for something to happen, but as the time went on and nothing happened, I grew more relaxed. Maybe I had nothing to worry about from that front.

A loud squeal from my girls had my eyes searching for them.

"Arianna, Hannah," I called out to them. "Come off the beach."

I knew my girls and they tested me, pushing their luck, trying to get closer to the water. I didn't want them to get wet. Today was exceptionally chilly, although it was early October.

Shit, we won't be here to enjoy the beach next summer, or to see snowfall over the bay this winter. Why did I find it so upsetting?

The thought of uprooting them made me sad. But the fact of the matter was that we were bound to be uprooted regardless if I could afford the mortgage or not. Benito King might never find out I was his daughter, but he'd come to collect on one last generation of debt the Catalano family owed him.

It was my grandfather, an American Italian man that had no connections to the mafia, that made the arrangement. Talk about irony! My grandmother left her life in Italy to escape the mafia, married a normal guy that had an unfortunate gambling habit, and she was right back in the same world. Grandfather lost a significant sum in Casino Royale. Luckily for Grandpa, and unluckily for the women of my family, Benito offered him a way out through a Belles arrangement. Three generations of belles, every other

generation, starting with Grandpa's sister. I was supposed to be the next one, but my mother traded herself for me. One of my girls would be the last payment.

There is no divorce in the mafia, Bianca. My grandmother's voice was clear as day. *Your mother was promised in the Belles and Mobsters arrangement. Benito King wanted her for himself. He was already married, so he made her his whore.*

Except, my grandmother lied. I was promised in the Belles and Mobsters arrangement. My mother traded her place for me, leveraging Benito's blind desire for her.

One more generation was owed to that arrangement that my great-grandfather foolishly agreed to. Mother took my place. Could I somehow take my daughters' place if everything else fails?

Three lost lives for one man's gambling debt. It seemed fucking unfair to me. My mother has been Benito's prisoner longer than a free woman. Grandpa's sister was who the fuck knew where. Nobody ever heard from her after she was sold. Though Grandma heard a rumor she married a Russian mobster, Ivan Petrov.

No matter what, Bianca, our kids will have a happy childhood. We have the best location for our little family. I could almost hear William's voice, carrying in the breeze.

Everything was slowly crumbling down. God, I missed him. I missed his comfort, his gentle arms around me. Even those times when he made me furious with his reckless actions. What would he have said if he knew all this? He didn't want to have children; the twins happened from a ripped condom. I never regretted it because they made me so happy.

My only regret was after learning who I was and what having a daughter meant. My mother and grandmother should have warned me. Instead, they left me to believe we were safe. We were never safe. Our livelihood was hanging by a thread all along.

After Dad died, I struggled with his loss and even more with the revelation that came with that. I never saw it coming. William and I grew apart while I tried to come to terms with the truths I learned. Except I couldn't tell him; I just couldn't. Maybe it was shame or fear, and I didn't want him to feel the same terror I felt. That one day someone would come and take my girls, make them go through the same suffering as my mother. It didn't matter that only one was owed to them. It was impossible for a mother to choose.

Then Willian got sick, and my heart broke as I watched him wither away in front of my eyes. Even with all doctors telling us there was no hope, I still hoped for a miracle, but it never came. The doctors were right. God, I hated when doctors were right.

So I never told him. Why send him off into death with such a horrible revelation and burden? Instead, I held his hand and assured him we'd be alright, that it was okay to let go. He didn't have to worry about us because I'd take care of us.

And I would. I just had to figure it all out. There I went again with my hope. You'd think I'd learn my lesson.

My cell phone rang in my cup holder. I didn't even bother glancing down. I just couldn't talk to people anymore. I couldn't pretend so I avoided them. Besides in the last few weeks only people that called me regularly were bill collectors. There was no point answering those anymore. I was way past the point of trying to make it work. I wasn't even drowning anymore. I had sunk.

The ringing finally stopped, and I exhaled in relief. No sooner did I do that, the phone rang again, and again, and again until I finally picked up the cell phone gazing at the caller ID.

I frowned. It was Angie. She called me after I left so abruptly that day. I didn't answer, and she left a voicemail

to call her back. I never did. It was unusual for her to call repeatedly. Hopefully she wasn't in trouble.

I answered the phone with a slight dread in my stomach. It felt like a premonition warning me that shit was about to hit the fan.

Stop it, Bianca. I cursed myself for feeding my anxiety.

"Hello."

"Bianca," her voice screeched on the phone. "Why are you not answering calls?"

Because I am busy worrying about my home being foreclosed on. Because I'm in debt up to my eyeballs. Oh, and because my husband stole from the mafia, and then he got sick and instead of returning the money, I decided to use it for hopeless treatments. And then you dragged me to have lunch in the same damn place as Nico Morrelli.

"I have been busy," I answered instead.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Good."

"Remember that guy from the restaurant," she started. How could I forget? Nico Morrelli wasn't a man you could ever forget. Even his scent was seared into my mind - a mixture of spice and cedar. "We've been dating for three weeks now."

I shouldn't have answered. I wasn't in the mood for conversations. Or to hear how Angie hooked up with a man that scared the living daylights out of me. If my friend was dating Nico Morrelli, I would certainly not hang out with her again. I'd keep my distance.

The threat of Benito looming over me was enough.

I took a shaky breath, feeling like I was teetering on the edge. Any moment I would lose my composure, and I'd start hysterically laughing. Or screaming. Or crying. I wasn't quite sure which. I hadn't cried since the day William died. I hadn't felt happiness since Dad's death.

"Are you listening?" Angie asked.

"Yes."

“Are you okay?” She sounded concerned, but I couldn’t get any words out to tell anyone what was going on in my life. I wouldn’t even know where to start or how to explain that clusterfuck.

“Yes.”

“Why do you always have to be strong?” Her question surprised me. I wasn’t strong. Actually, I felt like a failure, weak… ready to fall apart at any moment’s notice. “Anyhow, you should come on a date with us.”

Yeah, she was crazy. “No, thank you.”

“Gabito is easy going and you’d like him.”

I frowned. “Gabito?”

“Yes, the guy I have been dating for the past three weeks. We met him at the restaurant. Have you been listening at all?”

She isn’t dating Nico Morrelli?

Since I didn’t answer, she continued on. “Bianca, remember Nico Morrelli?”

Did I remember him? Those intense eyes, the hand that just by a slight touch burned on my back. Even now after weeks, I could still feel his fingers lingering on my skin. How could I forget Nico Morrelli? Even before I met him, he was unforgettable. Now, he was the image that flashed in my mind every time I touched myself.

Jesus, help me! Just thinking about it made me ache. It couldn’t be normal to go from sadness and fear to turn on in such a short span.

“Yes,” was all I said.

“He asked me about you,” her voice was hesitant, but my heart etched itself into my ribs. *Does he know?* “I don’t want to upset you,” she added. *Maybe he thinks about me while he touches himself too?*

I slapped my hand on my forehead. Someone had to beat my head into a poll.

“Why would I be upset?” I barely choked out the words.

Whatever he was asking about had nothing to do with me and had no impact on my life. *Right?* He wouldn't know what my husband had done. Or what I had done. If he did, this conversation wouldn't be happening. I'd be dead already.

And most certainly he wouldn't know that I pictured his hands on me as I touched myself. Fantasizing about Nico Morrelli had to stop, effective immediately.

"He is looking for a younger woman to be his companion for an event he has to attend. It could be a great opportunity," she responded, although she made no sense. "He asked if you would be interested."

A sharp inhale and my lungs were full of fresh air. I did not expect this at all.

"I don't understand," I muttered into the phone. "Like an escort?"

"I guess you can think about it like that."

"Why didn't he ask you?" This conversation was getting weirder by the second. I watched my girls as they inched to the water, kneeling and splashing each other with their hands. I knew they couldn't resist it.

Kind of like I wouldn't be able to resist Nico Morrelli if I was around him nonstop. My body's reaction to him was too intense, unlike anything I have ever felt before. He was dangerous, and I had to keep my distance.

I'll just think about him while I touch myself. Great, I only decided a mere minutes ago that I'd put a stop to it.

"I actually asked him to consider me," she admitted reluctantly. "I asked him about three months ago and then again now. He told me he wasn't interested. He just wants a woman our age on his arm."

A woman our age?

Well, Angie was my age. If she was willing and interested, it would be easier for him to have her on his arm. She could handle those situations. I was terrible at

socializing. And she never stole from him… it was an added bonus for her.

But it shocked me to hear he wasn't interested. Angie was beautiful, much more beautiful and accomplished than me. I imagined it shouldn't matter to a man like Nico Morrelli what woman accompanied him to an event, as long as she did what he expected.

Wait a minute, he must have expected added benefits, I told myself. My pulse picked up and a sweet ache pulsed between my thighs. I suspected it didn't have anything to do with being scared. It was because I found him attractive.

Not that I would ever go around that man. I wanted to stay alive, thank you very much!

"You are interested in him but you are dating Gabito?" The thought pierced through my Nico lust-hazed brain.

Angie would always be an enigma to me. Her way of thinking made no sense to me.

"It's complicated," she said.

I exhaled. With Angie, it was always complicated. I didn't need anything complicated right now.

"I have some stuff going on," I finally answered. "I'm not much for being a companion or hanging out."

As if she expected my answer, she hurriedly replied. "It is like a job, Bianca. And he pays ***very*** well." She accentuated *very*.

This didn't make any sense at all. "He pays to have someone accompany him to an event? Why? Can't he find a date?" I scoffed the last few words. We both knew that man was looking for more than a pleasure of someone's company.

"Well, that is just it. He doesn't want to give the wrong impression to a woman so he sticks to having his plus one as a business arrangement. Believe me, it wouldn't feel like a job at all, and you'd get crazy amounts of cash. Probably triple that of a normal salary."

I stared at my children as wheels turned in my head. At this point, they took their shoes off and were splashing each other by jumping in the shallow water. I knew material things didn't mean anything, but I had so many memories here. Was it wrong to want to keep this at any cost? Just for a bit longer?

After all, it was just being an escort to a wealthy man… correction, ruthless mobster that I stole from… to business events, right? I mean, even if I slept with him -

I immediately cut my train of thoughts.

Really, Bianca? You read plenty of articles and saw enough movies to know these kinds of arrangements entail a lot more. Plus, once he figured out William's connection to me and the debt we owed him, he'd take me into the woods and put a bullet in my brain.

Just like in *The Godfather*. Or was that in *The Sopranos*? I couldn't quite remember.

"Why don't you hear him out and decide then?" Angie recommended. "He wants your phone number so he can contact you directly. Can I give it to him?"

Arianna and Hannah squealed in delight as they fell onto their knees. They were a complete mess, and it made me warm on the inside to see them so happy. They were all my happiness. I didn't want them cooped up in a small apartment, in an unfamiliar neighborhood. Parents worked all night, stripped, sold their souls for their children… this wasn't much different, was it? Besides, Nico Morrelli could be strictly looking for plus one for events and nothing more. Simple as that.

It would be good to get some money stashed up, for when we had to run. We'd have to run eventually.

Except that his touch burned and his eyes mesmerized me. And he would kill me if he knew we stole his money.

"No," I finally told her. I wouldn't be any good to my children dead. "I'm sorry, I can't do it."

The world of Nico Morrelli and the mafia was a step closer to Benito King. If he came after the girls for his fucked up arrangements and I was dead, William's parents couldn’t protect them. They knew nothing about it. My mother would try to protect them, but she had sacrificed so much already.

Benito King deserved to die.

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Chapter Five

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NICO

A vase flew through the air and crashed behind Luciano, sending pieces of it flying all around. Cassio was lucky he ducked when he did; otherwise, he might have gotten hit in the back of his head.

This must be Luciano's wife, I mused silently.

He had been searching for her for over three years, and I could finally understand why. The woman was a beauty with that ginger red hair and indigo blue eyes that burned with anger as she glared at her husband.

But there was chemistry there too. Enough to set this room on fire. I would definitely not remain in it while those two burned the house down though.

"I hate your fucking guts," she hissed. And this was the reason I didn't believe in marriage, unless it was a business arrangement. The honeymoon period ended way too quickly, and it left you with a lifetime of regrets and arguing.

"Wife, these are my friends. Cassio, Luca, Alessandro, and Nico. Let's leave family drama for later and say hi to them."

None of us bothered to look away, watching the exchange with interest. We never pretended to be decent men. We were fucking mobsters and lived up to the name.

We were sinners, through and through. Maybe not as fucked up as Benito King but sinners nonetheless.

To Luciano’s wife's credit, she never even spared us a glance. I always liked a woman with a backbone. Bianca Carter’s image flashed in my mind. I couldn’t wait to sink into that delicious body that I couldn’t stop thinking about from the moment her luscious ass backed into me at the restaurant.

The revenge would be sweet.

“I don’t give a damn about your friends, Luciano,” she spat out in disgust. “Any friends of yours are enemies of mine.”

He was on his feet in the blink of an eye, hovering over her. It didn’t escape me that he was sporting a hard on, something I would have to work at unseeing for the rest of my life.

“Now, Grace. We don’t want to be rude to our guests. Be a good wife and say hi.” I had to stifle a laugh. Luciano would have his hands full. I had never seen the ruthless banker of the underworld lose his shit like this before.

No wonder the Romano belles fetched the highest price in the Belles and Mobsters auctions. If her ancestors were anything like her!

“No.”

“Do I need to take you outside and put you across my knees?”

“Fuck. You. Husband.”

I swore those two enjoyed bickering. Like some kind of a damn foreplay. It didn’t bode well for either one of them, because they would both succumb to their attraction. There was no question about it.

“We’ll do that later,” he told her softly. His voice was threatening, and I was surprised his wife seemed to only rise to the threat.

“You can do that later by yourself. I want my own room.”

“No.”

Their voices lowered, and I thanked all the saints. There were certain things I really didn’t need to know about my friends. I’d go to war with them, fight alongside them, kill alongside them, but their sex life, I’d prefer not to know about.

“Oh, great!” Luca, Cassio’s younger brother muttered. “Luciano is taking a fuck break.”

“You are just jealous you don’t get a fuck break,” I smirked. He flipped me the bird, and I laughed because he knew I was right.

The next moment a soft moan traveled over and proved Luca’s words right. I guess Luciano couldn't make it to their bedroom.

“Jesus, I’m gonna need a drink to get through these noises,” Alessio grunted, although his lips slightly tilted up into a smirk. He rarely smiled, not that I blamed him. His father was one fucked up man that put his eldest son through some serious shit.

He went to the little mini bar stocked up with Luciano’s favorite alcohol. I joined him and poured myself a stiff one. If Luciano decided to pleasure his woman the entire night, we'd have to pick this conversation back up tomorrow. Maybe the rest of us could resort to spending the night drinking.

The last time, about ten years ago, we all got completely drunk, it ended up being a night of discovery and not all of it good. Ten years ago, we all got shitfaced on cheap liquor in Moscow. It was the night we all revealed too much of the past and scars we wanted to forget, wished for a life we would never have, and formed a pact to fight together. Always! No matter what, we had each other’s back.

Alexei Nikolaev was part of the pact that we formed that night. He was the reason we all went to Moscow. He might not be here, but he could always call us, and we’d have his back. In our world, it was priceless to have men that would

watch your back. And friends! These men, I considered friends.

I downed the drink in one swift gulp and immediately poured myself another one.

Bianca Carter! Her name became a constant whisper in my head over the last two weeks. I couldn't wait to have her in my bed. To ruin her.

Bianca Carter came back onto my radar over two years ago, and I have been patiently weaving the web around her, without her even knowing it. The first time I saw her was in my club, a lifetime ago. When my sister was still alive. Bianca couldn't have been but eighteen or nineteen at that time. I was a better man back then.

Then, life threw her my way again when Nicoletta was murdered. I couldn't believe it when I saw the pictures of the woman that would be my ticket to revenge against Benito King.

The attraction was still there, just as it was the first time I saw her. The intense pull I felt towards her was unlike anything before. The question was what to do with it. I wanted her in my bed. I knew she felt that attraction that brimmed between us for that short moment in the restaurant. When I touched her back, it was like fire seared through my skin and straight to my cock. And I only touched her back for Christ's sake.

"I thought someone said your wife was a meek pianist?" Luca's voice pulled me from my thoughts. Luciano strode back to his chair, a wide grin on his face. "And here she is threatening to kill us all."

"Fuck off," he spat back to him. I shook my head at the poor schmuck. There was no way I'd ever let that happen to me. Yes, I desired a certain woman with dark hair and dark brown eyes, but I would never fall under her spell. No woman ever kept my interest long. Yes, she fascinated me, but that would lose its shine just as fast as any other. It was always the same.

“She hasn’t forgiven you?” Cassio asked the unnecessary question.

“No.” Luciano sounded frustrated. Not that I could blame his wife. I didn’t think any of us in this room, including Luciano himself, could blame her. You just didn’t play Russian Roulette with women. But Luciano didn’t need to hear that; he already knew it.

“Are you sure you want to sleep in the same room?” Alessio questioned. “She might kill you in your sleep. She hates your guts.”

Luciano glared at him with fury. “Fuck you, asshole.”

Alessio chuckled like the bastard he was. “I’m good. Although, you might want to keep your woman under you all night. From the sounds we’ve just heard, she seems to be receptive to you in that arena.”

“I might shoot you one of these days,” Luciano growled at him, but there was a grin on his face and a gleam in his eyes. It would seem Alessio just gave him an idea.

“Don’t pay attention to Alessio,” I chimed in, feeling sorry for the poor bastard. “He’s just jealous because he can’t get his dick into the woman he wants.”

Alessio promptly flipped me the bird. We all knew the story. He touched a young thing that was forbidden and now he craved more. But the woman was out saving the world while men like us fucked it up.

“I swear, watching you guys makes me grateful not to deal with women on a longer than one night basis,” Luca retorted dryly.

“Your time is coming, brother.” Cassio smirked at his younger sibling. “And I look forward to seeing you squirm.”

This time Luca flipped the bird at his older brother. “Hold your breath, brother. See how well it works out.”

Cassio flipped him two birds, and I had to chuckle. We were considered among the most ruthless, most feared mobsters on the East Coast and here we acted like teenagers, flipping each other middle fingers.

“Okay, back to the business at hand,” Luciano announced. “Do we have any update on fucking Alphonso and what he is doing?”

I grabbed my glass and took another drink. “I have a little bit more detail on the Romano connection to the Kings.”

And the King's connection to Bianca Carter. But the latter piece I’d keep to myself. For now!

“We are all ears,” Luciano said with a grim determination on his face. He hated their guts, not that I could blame him. Both of us had lost a sister to Benito King. Luciano’s sister might have not died directly by Benito’s hand like mine, but he had indirect involvement. I had to take a measured breath and force the tension out of my body. It wouldn’t do me any good to snap now, I was close to extracting my own revenge on Benito King.

“Now take this with a grain of salt since there is no hard evidence,” I started. “The Romano family is old, they go back at least two centuries here in the States. So does the King family.” Cassio nodded. We all knew that the King family ran the criminal underworld in Europe, and when they migrated here, they continued the same path, establishing their territory. “The story was there was some bad blood between your ancestors back in Europe. The Romano family were wealthy and amongst nobility. A Romano daughter fell for one of the Kings while both families still lived in Europe. Once the Romano head found out, they hunted the man down and hung him. They considered them a lower class. Shortly after, the Kings migrated to the States and established themselves. Revolutions swept through Europe and the Romano family lost pretty much everything. When they migrated, unfortunately for them, they landed in the King’s territory. Anyhow, the agreement was made between the head of the King family and Romano family. Each generation would

provide one woman, a belle, to the King family. As compensation for the man the Romano family killed."

"What the fuck-" Cassio grumbled at me, annoyance in his voice. "Are you fucking shitting us? Because I am not in the mood for stupid stories."

"No, I am quite serious. I'm still digging, but it turns out the King family saw an opportunity. They expanded that agreement to some other families too. Some are one-time deals, others longer term deals. The problem is finding evidence to support this."

Finding out about this Belles and Mobsters arrangement was a surprise. It almost seemed fictitious. My first trace was to check on the history of Romano women. And sure enough, there was one in each generation that either married a mobster or became a mistress to one.

"So where did you hear this?" Luciano questioned. I couldn't blame them for being suspicious, the story was incredible. If they only knew what I learned about Bianca Carter, they'd believe it even less. But I wasn't prepared to reveal that. First, I would use her in my revenge, then protect her. Even though I was offering that protection for selfish reasons.

"Of all people, from my mother."

"And you believe her?" Cassio asked, his voice doubtful. Not that I could blame him! My mother wasn't exactly a role model or sane these days. More often than not, she was drunk.

"It was actually something I also heard even when I was a kid, from my grandmother. Apparently my great-grandfather hit a financial snafu and needed money. He was approached by one of your ancestors, Cassio, and was offered a bailout, in return for one of the belles in our family for two generations. My grandfather told him to go fuck himself, and that was it."

The meaning of it hung heavy in the air. This was something completely different to human smuggling.

“What do they do with the women? They really marry a mobster?” Luciano asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “They offer them for sale. You know, fancy upbringing and good pedigree fetches a high price among men in our world.” The whole concept didn’t sit well with me, but then it wasn’t as if I was an honorable man. “But the word is that belles from the Romano family have been fetching the largest sum for centuries. And about a hundred years ago, the Romano family got into human trafficking, led by their great-great grandmother. And guess who she teamed up with?” They all watched me with suspense. “You got it. With Cassio’s ancestors. The Romano family offered a perfect, legitimate front.”

My mother gave me a lead and it proved to be more than a needle in a haystack. Using my IT company resources, I was able to retrieve arrangements between the King and Romano family. Each transaction, each auction, it was all out there. History was easier to dig through than future plans. Every single move these days leaves a digital footprint. It was how Bianca’s mother inadvertently left a clue to her daughter.

“So, they were no longer required to offer their daughters?”

“Oh no, the agreement still stands. The Belles and Mobsters' agreement continued, including belles from the Romano family. It is the biggest auction, fetching the largest sums. Women go to the highest bidder. Unfortunately for the Romano family, not all their family members had the stomach for it. There were hushed stories of random family members disappearing or being brought down if they tried to fuck with their new, secret business. Till Kennedy Romano.”

Personally, I couldn’t understand any man being okay with his daughter, niece, or any woman being put up for auction. This Belles and Mobsters agreement should be

squashed, along with the mafia men that participated in it. But first, I'd use it to my advantage.

"How is it that none of us heard of this before?"

"Well, none of us are really from old families," I explained. "Alessio came from old money, but his family is based in Canada. My family only got rich about a hundred years ago with the construction boom. Your father, Luciano, was first generation in the States, and he worked himself up within the ranks. And you quadrupled, if not more, what your father made, so you would have never needed the money. Cassio and Luca weren't in those circles, and really, their grandfather in Italy raised them. So their father kept them out of the loop."

"Holy fucking shit," Luca muttered. "Belles and mobsters. Who in their right mind would ever agree to offer a daughter to a man in our circles?"

He was right. I knew I wouldn't want my children to be part of this underworld. It was cruel and unforgiving, putting every single member at risk. Just look at what it cost my sister.

"I would imagine desperate people would agree to it," Cassio muttered.

"I hate that fucking old bastard." Luca didn't hide his feelings about his father. He hated him with a passion. Not that I could blame him. If Cassio and he knew the added part that I found out, they'd hate their father even more. They might even kill me once they learn I have known they had a sibling for years and kept it to myself.

However, I couldn't risk exposing it. I had my own score to settle with Benito King first. Soft brown eyes flashed in my eyes, sending a pang of guilt at putting an innocent woman in the crossfire, but I hardened myself. My sister was innocent too.

"But again, there is no evidence for any of this. And good luck finding someone that would be willing to attest to this," I added. The transactions I was able to dig up and

historical events of the auctions were hard evidence, but there was still need for assumptions. It wasn't as if you could get a receipt for each belle sold.

Cassio's jaw was pressed so tight, I thought it might snap at any second.

I continued speaking, “As you know, Alphonso only had a brother. So there was no Romano belle offering. Kennedy Romano was in politics; he was pretty good too. He had a childhood sweetheart that refused to marry him for many years. The world was flabbergasted. They were a perfect match. She came from old money. The whispering is that her family knew about the ongoing deal the Romano family had and the human trafficking. Kennedy Romano became educated by his wife in his own family business affairs, after which he cut all contact with the Romano family. His political career grew fast and strong. He was going after the mafia and crime relentlessly. There were stories he could have easily become the next president. And they had a little girl; the only child for that generation since Alphonso never married.”

Luciano understood the meaning. His wife was owed to the King family.

“The word is that Grace Romano was meant for Benito King’s legitimate son,” I concluded with the last bit of finding. “Whatever the highest price she fetches, Marco King is to pay double.”

“What other families do the Kings have arrangements with?” Cassio gritted out.

“I don’t have concrete leads. Politicians, here in the U.S. and in Europe, movie stars, old families.” I took a deep breath and then slowly exhaled. If Cassio knew his father was prepared to drag a member of his own family through the auction, he’d blow a gasket.

Granted, Benito King didn’t know Bianca Carter was related to him. But it didn’t excuse his behavior.

“Do you think maybe Grace knows?” Cassio’s question was reasonable.

“We could ask her,” I suggested, glancing at Luciano.

His eyes traveled to the shattered vase pieces on the floor.

“She won’t tell us anything,” he concluded in a hoarse voice. I had to agree with him. Those two weren’t on best terms, and it was clear his wife didn’t trust him.

“Fuck, we have to do something,” Luca gritted.

“Do we know how it works? The belle offering?” Luciano questioned. “When? Where?” Luciano looked like he’d be sick, and I couldn’t blame him. The whole concept was sickening. “Raphael mentioned he overheard Alphonso speak to Benito about the delivery of a woman.”

Massimo, Luciano’s cousin and right hand man, barged through the door at that moment, an alarmed look on his face.

“What is it?” Luciano asked him.

“I broke it.”

“Broke what?” Luciano questioned.

“I broke your wife’s firewalls.”

Two hours later, as I headed out the Vitale residence, Cassio was right behind me. Luca already disappeared into the night. Probably chasing a skirt. Women tended to open their doors and legs wide for that guy. *Maybe his suave moves*, I scoffed to myself.

I was headed for the airport and Cassio for his place in Hampton. I stopped before entering the car. Cassio’s Aston Martin was parked right next to my Bugatti.

“Cassio,” I started and he paused to look back at me. “Did you ever consider that your father might have other illegitimate children?”

He raised his eyebrow. “We’d know about them. You know he likes to make full use of his children.”

“What if it was a daughter?”

He froze for a second but then choked out a laugh. “He doesn’t have a daughter. He’d brag about it and use her to make himself stronger. He’s wanted a daughter for as long as I can remember. There must be God after all not to have granted him that wish.”

God did grant Benito his wish, but he just didn’t know it. I’ve heard many times from my own father how much Benito desired a daughter. It was the only thing that my father succeeded over my rival. My father managed to produce a daughter.

“Why do you ask, Nico?”

I shrugged. “Just wondering. I’ll talk to you soon.”

With a nod, I got into the car. This secret might just cost me my friends. Cassio and Luca were nothing like their father and would burn down the world to protect an innocent family member. Blood or not.

“We have ten minutes until landing,” my stewardess informed me. I nodded my thanks. It had been a long day. After the latest discovery of Grace Vitale’s side business, which ironically coincided with her husband’s, I headed out of New Jersey, taking my private jet back to Baltimore.

Luciano would have his hands full with his wife. I, on the other hand, wanted to focus on Bianca Carter and couldn’t wait to have my hands full of her.

Lately, all my thoughts were consumed with that beautiful woman. I was intrigued and that didn’t happen to me often anymore. For over twenty years, women were a pastime. They didn’t belong in my darkness. But this woman, she was a glimmer of light in my dark world. My plan would surely squash it, but it was necessary. I had to go through with it.

As my private plane started descending, I justified to myself what I was about to do. The end always justified the means. And this would ensure I got what I wanted. Revenge and the woman that meant more to Benito King than his sons or anyone else for that matter. Bianca needed saving, and my protection would offer that to her.

In return, she'd grant me my revenge and give me her body. It was a fair trade.

All the years of ruthless ruling of the underworld had taught me that power was the only thing that mattered. After watching my father for the first twenty years of my life, I studied and learned what worked and what didn't. I worked hard to get where I was today; I had to bring down my father in the process or risk losing the entire territory due to his actions.

Unlike the old Morrelli, I worked with the CIA, NSA, FBI, ICE, DEA, Cartels, Bratva, all affiliations of the mafia. It gave me information on everything and everyone. Information was power and not knowing was weakness. Something I couldn't afford to have if I was to keep people I care about protected. Dealing with so many afflictions was what prompted me to start an information technology company and it took off overnight, quadrupling the value of my businesses. And, it was how I found out about Bianca's connection to Benito King. Like I said, information was power.

I ruled with fear but gained respect through actions. My father only instilled fear and terror, and took advantage of the vulnerable. My next move would put Benito King in his place, once and for all. The only claim and connection he had on my territory would be eliminated - both in Maryland and in Italy. And currently that was Bianca and her mother's family.

Bianca Carter had too many weaknesses and didn't even realize it. Open for the taking. Not for much longer though. Her husband was a pawn in my revenge. I didn't anticipate

his sickness, but I'd be a liar if I said it didn't work out for the best. From the moment I learned Bianca's connection to Benito King, she was the only thing on my radar. She had grieved her husband and had ample time to mourn.

It was time to claim that woman for my own and execute Benito's downfall.

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Chapter Six

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NICO

I was in the midst of a multi-billion dollar negotiation and all I could think about was Bianca Carter. Those warm brown eyes sent sparks through my body and straight to my cock. I could still feel her small tempting body bumping into me. Her messy dark hair damp from the rain had smelled like spring flowers and lilacs. I wondered if she realized how beautiful she was. Imagining her petite body as my cock slid in and out of her was the only thing on my mind lately.

When she abruptly got up and left, I had to force myself not to grab her wrist to stop her. There was so much vulnerability in those eyes as they darted around the restaurant. I have been scheming to get Bianca into my life for so long, but one thing I never anticipated… that I'd feel a pang of remorse for using her.

Her friend, Angie, had better find a way to convince her to be my companion. I bribed her with a significant amount of cash to work on her friend. I had to scoff at the term companion. I wanted more from her and wouldn't stop until I got it.

I knew everything there was to know about Bianca Carter. She married her high school sweetheart. They were both young. Right out of college, she worked in a legal

department as a paralegal juggling criminal cases, and not long after, she got pregnant. When she had her twin daughters, she became a stay at home mother and wife. They made a picture perfect family, both were loved by their friends and family.

What got Bianca and William onto my radar three years ago was learning that she was Benito King's only daughter. Her mother hid her from Benito, dumping her with the man she loved before Benito took her for himself. The only thing I couldn't comprehend was why her mother ever crossed paths with the King family. There were no connections between the two. Her mother never left Maryland until the day she left with Benito. I left it to coincidence that Benito spotted Bianca's mother during one of his visits.

Unfortunately for Sofia Catalano.

The night William Carter stole from me was supposed to kick off my plan. The bag planted with money was a test. I had it all ready as I watched their house from my small yacht in the stormy Chesapeake Bay waters and listened to their conversation. I watched Bianca see her friend out, glancing in my direction several times. Almost as if she could sense me. Ultimately, it was hearing the dialogue between Bianca and her husband that made me delay my plan. Her husband was gravely sick and was enroute to dying.

It was the only reason her husband got a free pass for stealing and my plans got delayed. Yes, I was ruthless but not a complete asshole. The man was already on his deathbed. And his wife… I kept an eye on Bianca, waiting for the right moment to restart my revenge.

Well, now was that time. She was within my grasp, and I'd use any means necessary to complete what I set out to do. Keeping her in my life would be an added, unforeseen bonus; the one that wasn't on the table when I started this.

Bianca's life had spiraled out of control. She was left in severe financial trouble and was on the brink of losing it

all. And I could help her with that. And she'd help me avenge Nicoletta's death.

Should I feel guilt at using Bianca? *Maybe*.

Did I? *No*.

She'd be safe for the rest of her life, along with her children.

It intrigued me that she didn't flirt with either Gabito or me, knowing we were wealthy. Most other women in her position would have flirted and thrown themselves at us at the restaurant. Her friend, Angie, certainly went straight to work and she wasn't in financial trouble. I had already refused her a few times before.

As irony would have it, Angie was hungry for power and status and would probably fall all over herself to be Benito King's relative. Yet, her friend seemed her polar opposite. Angie was beautiful but in a boring, predictable kind of way, and she was after the money along with status. She would fit the profile of Benito's daughter.

But not Bianca Carter. She sat there lost in her thoughts; sadness enveloped all around her. She kept as much distance from me as possible, keeping herself guarded. I didn't think she knew about Benito King. All my information showed she had very little contact with her mother and has never met him nor his son, Marco.

She was a mystery. I would have expected her to be more aggressive going after the money than Angie since she had a lot more to lose. Instead, she stood up and walked away.

It meant she had more at stake to lose than money and her home. What was it? I didn't like not having answers. So for the first time in my life, I found myself obsessing over someone.

"Mr. Morrelli, do you agree?" My lawyer's voice brought my attention back to now. I forced my thoughts to the gentlemen in front of me. It didn't matter what they hoped

for, I would get the terms exactly as I wanted them. My fantasizing about Bianca would have to wait.

An hour later, the meeting was finally behind me, and with the terms as I wanted them, I strode back to my office. It was almost too predictable. Some challenges would have been welcomed. I had a feeling Bianca wouldn't disappoint me in that department.

My phone beeped, and I retrieved it.

It was from my secretary. Angie couldn't get Bianca's agreement to take my companion offer and refused to share her number. Her phone number was redundant since I already had it. But I wanted her willingness.

Well, that didn't work. I knew she'd be a challenge, and I was up for it.

On to plan B. Because I had no qualms using other methods to convince her to take my offer. Except, the offer was just upgraded and terms more permanent. And this one I would work out directly with Bianca Carter. After all, with interest, she owed me millions now.

It was the only leverage I had, and I'd hate to use it. So, I hoped she'd take this first bait, and I'd ease her into my plan. She wouldn't know all the variables, just the necessary ones. But now I would have to force her hand. I needed to understand her, what drove her. Somehow I wasn't surprised to hear she refused the deal.

Truthfully, I didn't need Angie for plan A either, but it would have been easier if she dealt with her friend rather than me directly. I suspected Bianca's connection to William Carter was why she refused the offer. It certainly wasn't because there was no chemistry. There was plenty of sizzling in that department.

She was petrified of me, and what would happen if I connected her with the stolen bag of money.

Poor little angel. She didn't even realize that I've known all along.

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Chapter Seven

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BIANCA

The girls sat at the kitchen island, eating their cereal as I packed their lunch for the day. My motions were automatic, but the entire time my conversation with Angie played on repeat in my head.

Nico Morrelli wanted me to be his companion. *Escort,* I corrected myself.

Jesus, like I didn't have enough on my plate, now this got thrown into the mix. It occurred to me too late that maybe saying no to a man like Nico Morrelli might not have been smart. But the truth of the matter was that I didn't want to be his *companion.* I cringed at the word.

My cell phone beeped and I quickly swiped the message open. It was William's mother, letting me know she was here.

"Okay, girls," I exclaimed with a fake excitement. "Grandma and Grandpa are here. Who is ready for the zoo?"

"Me, me, me," they both answered in unison, their blue eyes shining in excitement.

It was Friday and Grandma wanted to take them to the zoo, so instead of going to their preschool, they got a day off to spend with their grandparents. After their zoo excursion, they'd spend the night at their house, leaving

me all alone with my worries. The office I worked at was closed on Fridays, so I'd have a lonely day and night. Somehow the lonely nights were worse than days.

I ushered them out the door with a brave smile on my face and their lunch boxes in my hand. Keeping my fake façade, I behaved as if life was peachy. I didn't want to alarm William's parents. They have had enough heartaches and sorrow since losing their only son.

The girls ran across the lawn, wearing matching sunflower dresses and sunglasses.

"Girls, shoes," I yelled after them laughing. They constantly ran around barefoot. I grabbed two sets of shoes and picked up the pace after them.

"Grandma," Arianna squealed while at the same time Hannah shouted, "Grandpa."

I smiled seeing the scene, and for a second, my heart felt lighter. William's parents loved the girls, more than life itself. From the moment they were born, they became the center of their grandparents' universe. It was almost bittersweet, because I knew my mother wanted to have the twins in her life. Just as she wanted me in her life. When they were born, Mom sent me two beautiful matching necklaces for each of the girls with individual pendants - one had a handmade glass pendant of the stormy sea and the other a glass ball of a blue sky with white clouds.

A reminder to keep them safe. *Greece is nice this time of year. The skies are blue. And the seas are stormy.*

I fucking hated Benito King. That vile man was keeping her from living her life to the fullest. She couldn't be a mother nor a grandmother because of him. He wasn't only a criminal, but also a cruel and evil man.

Both Grandma and Grandpa Carter were already out of their car, with the back doors open. Grandma Carter scrambled through the trunk and then waved at us with a little garden shovel in her hand.

I chuckled softly at the image she portrayed. “You look scary with that shovel in your hand,” I said through a smile.

She grinned. “I’m a pretty scary grandma,” she retorted with a smile. “I was just looking for their little iPads. They can play a little game while we are driving into the city.”

I nodded. “That will keep them occupied.”

Both of my girls were already climbing into their car seats.

“Hey, hey,” I pretended to be upset. “How about a kiss for me?”

They giggled and jumped out of Grandpa Carter’s Buick to give me a quick peck on the cheeks.

Shaking my head, I strode to Grandpa Carter. “I feel cheated,” I complained. “Just a little peck and off they go. What’s next?”

He chuckled, patting my cheek. “Well, next they go off to college without a backward glance.”

I frowned, not liking that at all. “Did we do that?”

His soft smile had a hint of sadness in it. “You and William were so excited to go.”

I felt a painful tug at my heart each time we talked about William. Hell, each time I thought about him. I could see sadness lingering in Grandpa Carter’s eyes that were so much like his son’s.

I hugged him tight and over his shoulder spotted a black, fancy car parked across the street, an unfamiliar vehicle. My heart sped up, then slowed down. It tends to do a lot of that lately. I blamed it on paranoia.

I stepped back and his eyes darted away, hiding the glistening tears shining in them. Several heartbeats passed before he frowned.

“Is that an Aston Martin?” he asked, awe in his voice. He’d always loved cars. So did I, but I’ve never been good with models.

Glancing across the street, I narrowed my eyes. A familiar tug at my chest and worry crossed my mind, but I

pushed it away. There was a perfect explanation for an unfamiliar car around. Neighbors must have guests over.

I shrugged my shoulders. “No idea,” I muttered before changing the subject.

“How are you feeling?” I asked him. “How did your check-up go?”

Grandma Carter strode to us, and she wrapped her arms around me, pressing a loud kiss on my cheek.

“Doctor said his cholesterol is good and all his results came back positive.”

“That’s great,” I told them in relief. “I’m so happy to hear that.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?” Grandpa Carter asked, worry lacing his voice.

I nodded my head. “Yes, I’ll be fine,” I told him with an assurance that I didn’t feel. It was healthy to spend time away from your children, at least that was what I kept hearing.

A few minutes later, I watched them all drive away, waving at them as they passed me and waiting until the car disappeared from my view. The Aston Martin still sat there, parked, and for a moment I swore I saw a dark shadow.

Jesus, stop with paranoid thoughts, I scolded myself.

With a heavy sigh, I went back into the house. At a loss of what to do with myself, I strode into the kitchen, my safe haven. This beloved house wouldn’t be ours much longer. I’d have to find a way to tell William’s parents and the girls.

My eyes traveled over the light kitchen counters and the cabinets. It was where I spent most of my time. I loved this room, with large windows that overlooked the bay and light cabinets that combined with natural light made this room a perfect kitchen. William and I had spent so many hours hunting for the cabinets that we could both agree on. I wanted light; he wanted natural wood. We settled on off white cabinets with the gray-striped white marble countertops.

Built with love. We built this house with love. Despite disparities and his one-time infidelity, I couldn't forget that.

Slowly, as if saying goodbye to my kitchen, I started pulling ingredients out of the fridge and pantry for chocolate chip and gingerbread cookies. I wanted to enjoy this place for as long as I could. Besides, it was my stress reliever - baking, cooking, making homemade ice cream.

It was only ten in the morning, and I probably wouldn't eat any of the cookies, but I had nothing else to do. Although I loved our Fridays off most of the time, today I regretted it. Going into work would have kept my mind off things.

After washing my hands, I grabbed the cutting board and fresh ginger, then started chopping it when the doorbell sounded.

"Come in," I yelled, thinking it had to be William's parents coming back because they forgot something. Something was always forgotten. A baby doll, favorite stuffed animal, a coloring book… you name it.

I started cutting rhythmically, the repetitive movement already easing the tension in my shoulders. It must be the Italian in me that enjoyed tinkering in the kitchen. My girlfriends in high school cringed at it, screaming feminism. But I loved it and refused to give it up. Even in the name of feminism.

I smiled and raised my head, all the while continuing my chopping.

"Did you guys forget-" My voice trailed off and my heart stopped for a fraction of a second before it resumed beating frantically while my pulse skyrocketed.

No, no, no. This couldn't be.

Nico Morrelli stood at the entrance of my kitchen with two men at his side, looking like a dark shadow in his expensive Armani suit, not a single speck of dust on it. His presence sucked the oxygen out of my lungs and drained my brain of all thoughts.

How does he know where I live? Duh, those people probably dig up dirt on anyone. An address would be a piece of cake. *Oh my God, Nico Morrelli is in my house!*

I squeezed my eyes shut, every single drop of my blood draining out of me. This had to be a nightmare. This was what I have been fearing for the past sixteen months. Yes, I fucking touched myself with images of this man, but he had to remain in my head, not physically be in my house.

Releasing a shaky breath, I opened my eyes, all the while praying that my mind was playing tricks on me. Our eyes connected, that gray stare sending shivers down my spine. I found it hard to breathe, my heart raced so hard.

This man didn't belong in my house, this neighborhood, my life.

"Do you let anyone just walk into your home, Bianca?" My name rolled off his tongue like sex dipped in sin. Except he was here to kill me. I knew it as well as I knew my name. It was time to settle the debt.

Nico's eyes were on me, watching me carefully, waiting for me to crack or do something stupid. Too late! I have done something stupid sixteen months ago; I spent all his money. The only thing left to do was to crack.

My fingers wrapped tightly around the handle of the knife, my joints complaining at the grip. The tension in me blazed, threatening to burn me to ashes. I didn't want to die. I should apologize, explain, beg… anything. Instead, I continued staring at him, unable to utter a single word.

"Do you?" he drawled, repeating his question.

"No," I rasped, my voice full of fear even to my own ears.

Nico's eyes raked over me, and I wondered if he was trying to determine how he would kill me. I imagined it probably wouldn't be a difficult task for him. I was fairly petite; he could probably hide my body in his trunk.

A silent whimper got stuck in my throat at that image. I wasn't ready to die. And I certainly didn't want to be

stuffed into a trunk.

“Do you know why I’m here?” Nico’s deep voice sounded like a threat. Or was it only my imagination? I wasn’t sure. My eyes traveled over the two men behind him. They weren’t as tall as Nico, but they looked just as strong, impassive expressions on their faces.

I lowered my gaze to my hands that gripped the knife like my life depended on it. It was the only weapon I had. Could I stab a man and take his life? I didn’t think so. Just the thought of hurting someone didn’t sit well with me.

My father taught me how to shoot, and some basic self-defense skills. He guessed one day I’d need them. But guns and violence just weren’t my thing. At least I didn’t think so. Father always said you didn’t know what you were capable of until you were cornered.

I weighed my options. I could outrun them. Lifting my gaze, I studied their form. They were big so probably not as fast, although they seemed fit. Too fit for my well-being right now.

I had to try and run. I couldn’t just sit here and wait for them to kill me. Maybe I’d run to John’s house until I figured out my next step. I glanced at my cell phone that still sat on the little kitchen table. Reaching for it was out of the question. I’d never make it out of the house if I went for it.

Taking an even breath in, my decision was made.

I’d run.

At least I would try to.

I knew the chances were slim to get away from all three of them, but I was younger. And faster. It played in my favor. My body shifted to the left when Nico’s voice stopped me dead in my tracks.

“Don’t do that,” he said in a smooth, timber voice, a clear warning in it. “I like the chase. With you, I’d like it even more.” My body froze at the unspoken threat.

I met his unmoving gaze clear of any emotions, but knowledge seared deep in them. He casually shoved his hands into his pants pockets, his blazer opening just enough to give me a glimpse of his gun holster.

A loud gulp echoed through the kitchen. It was mine. There would be no winning against this man. He knew it too. I was no match for him.

William and I lost the moment he grabbed that bag and I'd spent the money on his treatments. We gambled, and we lost - both William's life and the money. Now, it would cost me my life too. My heart pounded like a drum in my chest. It seemed to swell into a mallet and swing against my rib cage causing sharp pain with each breath I took. *This is it*, I realized. My girls would be left without either parent to see them grow up. Open for Benito's taking.

I'm dead.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. The images of Benito getting his dirty hands on them played in my mind and terror filled me. I needed to buy time.

"Just don't do it here," I choked out, thinking of all the horrible ways to be found dead. "My- my kids and in-laws will be back tomorrow," I rasped, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. Maybe if I could buy some more time, have them take me somewhere else, I could escape them. "I don't want them to find me dead here." I gulped hard, every fiber of me shaking with fear. I was grasping at straws here. "P-please."

I knew when I spent that money that nothing would be the same ever again. I had been on borrowed time, just as William was on his while the disease ate at him.

But I still hoped.

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Chapter Eight

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NICO

Fear rolled off Bianca in waves, and for a fraction of a second, guilt flooded my senses, but it dissipated just as fast. It was dangerous having those kinds of feelings in our world. I considered them dead to me, along with decency and compassion. If I had any left, I wouldn't be doing this.

The smell of her fear mixed with her perfume, but there was still hope shining in her eyes. She was a determined woman, and it drew me in further under her spell. It made me want her even more. Life dealt her some crappy cards, but she powered through it, fighting for her girls. She was stronger than my mother or my father, that was for sure.

Heck, she was debating stabbing one of us with the knife clutched in her hands. She was a fighter. She might not have known it yet, but there was no doubt in my mind that she was.

She eyed that knife in her hand like a lifeline, calculating her chances of escaping us. I could see it all in her eyes as she weighed her odds. But I knew she had nowhere to run, no funds to support her life on the run either.

"Guys, wait outside." My men obeyed without delay, their steps silent behind me.

Surprise flashed in her eyes, but she said nothing. There was no mistaking she was scared, though it didn’t stop her from watching me defiantly. Her determination and fire reflected in her dark gaze, burning there and clashing with my stare. She was intoxicating, my perfect storm of attraction. I had to sate it.

It would tie her to me for life, put her in a gilded cage.

She shifted nervously on her feet, her light blue dress hugging her curves and accentuating her dark hair even more. She called out to me like a siren’s song. I just had to make sure I didn’t fall under her spell.

That never bode well for any man.

She was a breath of fresh air against the darkness. It was amazing she retained her innocence through all the cruelty life threw her way. Did she know about her mother and Benito King?

“Now what?” she asked, her chin tilted up while her dark eyes challenged me.

It had only been a few weeks since I'd seen her, but she was even more stunning now, standing in front of me, surrounded by her things. Her dark chestnut brown hair fell down her slim shoulders, her body soft with curves just right to grip and hold.

“Sixteen months ago, your husband took something from me,” I said in a low voice, trying to keep this conversation private and sound non-threatening.

For a fraction, her face shattered, but she quickly got herself together.

“Yes,” she admitted, not even trying to deny it. I had to give it to her, she had guts. “I don’t have that money anymore.”

“I figured.”

My eyes traveled over her kitchen and the counter full of ingredients. I couldn’t tell what she was doing. It was too early for dinner; I wondered if she expected company. Was

she planning a date now that her girls went off with their grandparents?

Unexpectedly, like a lightning strike, jealousy shot through my veins, but I quickly dampened it. I'd squash any man connected to her. There would be no other men for this woman. The information I obtained indicated there wasn't a man in her life. Except for the friend, John. He'd have to go. I had torn down his little company, piece by piece, so he'd be busy for the foreseeable future.

Bianca shifted, her eyes wearily focused on me. She didn't particularly like me; it was written on her face. Although there was attraction. She couldn't deny it. From the moment our eyes connected in the restaurant, the attraction zipped between us and her fate was sealed. Technically, it was sealed when I learned who her true father was. After her husband's death, I decided to make her mine.

I watched her gaze skim over her kitchen, like she was seeking comfort in the familiar surroundings. The entire kitchen was done in white colors, off white with a splash of color here and there. The large bay windows overlooked the Chesapeake Bay Bridge in the distance. It was a million dollar view in a little house, full of warmth, love, and cookies. I didn't understand why she had so many glass cookie jars everywhere, enough to feed multiple families. I counted five different jars filled with chocolate chip cookies, sugar cookies, and gingerbread cookies.

The kitchen smelled like cookies. The space suited her; it was comfortable, delicate, and felt like home. Kind of like her.

"Are you going to kill me now?" she asked tightly.

I kept my jaw straight and eyes cold. That fucking money didn't mean anything to me, though if it was anyone else sixteen months ago, they would have been taught a lesson right away. You let one person steal from you and

get away with it, they all think they can do it. Besides, that money bag was a trap, and I had bigger plans for Bianca.

Sixteen months ago, I let William Carter keep that money and only one person knew it. My right hand man, Leonardo. He was on the yacht with me that night, listening to the conversation between Bianca and her husband. As it may be, I would now use it as leverage. It was time to collect the debt and put my plans into motion.

“With interest, your husband owes me about three million,” I said calmly, my eyes locked on her stiff form. “Give or take.”

Her eyes bulged.

“What? There was only three hundred thousand dollars in there,” she whispered, her body trembling. “What kind of interest is that?”

“There was six hundred thousand in the bag,” I told her. She shook her head, and I found it odd that she wouldn’t have known the correct amount. Was she lying? I didn’t think so; otherwise, she would have denied knowing about the money right off the bat. “Standard interest when someone steals from me,” I deadpanned. “Compounded daily.”

“That’s a rip off,” she spat. Anger flashed in her eyes, and I realized her defiance pleased me. She was a mixture of meek and attitude. Her cheeks flushed red with frustration. She was helpless.

“Maybe.”

“And it was three hundred thousand in the bag.” Did her husband not give her all the money?

She cleaned off her hands with a dishtowel, the move so domesticated. Somehow it suited her being a homemaker. I watched strands of her dark mane fall onto her face, and she blew them off. The gesture was simple and innocent, but it made my cock stiffen.

“Whatever. It doesn’t matter either way,” she mumbled tightly, speaking more to herself, then grabbed the knife

again as if she would resume cutting. “I don’t have it.”

Silence was thick between us, her back straight and her eyes alert on me, her knuckles white as she gripped her knife. I could only imagine how she hoped to stab me in my black heart with it.

“There are other ways you could pay,” I finally said.

“How?” She eyed me suspiciously, distrust rolling off her in waves.

“I have a proposition for you,” I commenced. “It would wipe out your debt and ensure you weren’t on the radar.”

“On the radar?” she repeated, blinking in confusion.

“You wouldn’t be on the list of people indebted to me,” I corrected myself. I didn’t want to reveal to her how much I knew just yet. First, I had to learn how much this beauty knew.

She tilted her head, as if studying me.

“You mean escort?” She snorted. “Like your prostitute or something?”

I had to bite the inside of my cheek. I wasn’t quite sure whether I should be offended that she’d found being mine so repulsive. Instead, I took it as a personal challenge.

“Actually, I had something a bit more permanent in mind.”

Her eyebrows creased, confusion in her expression. She was trying to get a read on me and understand me so she could find a way out. Good luck with that!

“Like what?” she asked in a low voice.

“Marriage.”

Her mouth parted, her expression morphed into one of shock. “Marriage?”

“Yes.”

“Whose?” Her wide eyes stared at me in disbelief as if she was convinced she misunderstood the meaning of my words.

“Yours to me.”

A choked laugh escaped her. “You must be joking. I don’t want to marry you!”

“You will marry me.” My voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. But her brows remained furrowed.

“But why?”

“Because you owe me your husband’s debt.” I thought it was obvious, but maybe I had to spell it all out for her. “Unless you have three million dollars laying around?”

She shook her head. “As if,” she muttered. “If I did, I wouldn’t be here. Trust me on that.”

I smiled at her honesty. I knew she didn’t have the money, but I had to be careful, steering this in the direction I wanted.

It was ironic that she didn’t want to marry me. Women have tried to trap me into marriage for decades, and here I was offering it to this woman and she struggled with the concept, reluctant to even be in the same room with me.

“So, what is it going to be?” Whether she wanted to or not, she would marry me. I’d rather she did it willingly though. Dragging her down the aisle might be overkill, but it was still an option if all else fails.

She shook her head again.

“You-you are a-” she searched for the right word, and then finally gave up. “You’re a mobster, a criminal.” *Ouch!* Talk about an ego deflator. “Shouldn’t you marry someone like you?”

“You are in my world, Bianca. After all, you stole from a criminal, so it makes you a criminal too. Like me.” She winced at my words. “That makes us a good fit.”

She scoffed. “In your dreams.”

Maybe not so meek after all! I would enjoy taming this dark-haired beauty very much. “You’ll find marriage to me to be beneficial. I’ll offer you and your family protection and financial security. In return, you will be my wife.”

“Protection from who?” She eyed me suspiciously.

“From other men like me,” I deadpanned.

“Like you?” Her voice was a whisper and her eyes wide, staring at me. Fuck, when she watched me like that, it took all I had not to just lift that dress and pound into her. The lust around this woman had to subside. Was this what kept Benito fascinated with her mother?

“Your mother is Benito King’s mistress.” She bit into her lip but not before I heard her gasp. There was no surprise on her face. She knew exactly who her mother’s lover was, and his status in the underworld. The question was whether she knew he was her biological father.

Then her chin tilted, her little telltale sign of stubbornness and defiance.

“So what?” She tried to sound brave. “She can do whatever she wants. She’s a grown woman. It has nothing to do with me.”

“You are not stupid, Bianca,” I drawled. “Being a daughter to Benito’s mistress makes you a target and you are wide open now. Vulnerable without any means to protect yourself.”

Resentment flashed on her beautiful face and those dark eyes.

“Right, you are going to protect my family,” she grunted, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “And if I don’t obey you during the marriage, you’ll destroy my family. Kind of a weird protection. I think I’m okay without it.”

Fuck, her defiance made me hard for her. To break her defiance and make her submit. I couldn’t wait to bury myself into this woman.

“You will have to be okay with it,” I told her, my voice portraying none of my thoughts. I had to be careful; otherwise, I might lose my control and drag her into the bedroom now. I had never wanted a woman as strongly as I did this one. “My men can kill you and dump your body where it will never be found.” Her eyes widened at my threat. “Or I can force you. Trust me, there are priests that

will marry us whether you are dragged down the aisle or walk down it willingly."

"You are insane," she hissed, pressing her left hand against her chest as if she was worried her heart would give out. Her right hand still held on to the knife.

"Maybe," I told her with a nod. "But those are my terms. Marriage or-"

I left the unspoken meaning lingering in the air. She already thought I was here to kill her, so I'd let her come to her own conclusions.

"Is that the only way?" she retorted dryly. "I preferred the escort option better. Is that still on the table?"

There was a hint of panic in her eyes, but she worked hard to hide it.

"No." I'd give it to Bianca Carter. She had guts, speaking to me like we were equals. Maybe it was her strength that captured me, not her vulnerability. She was a mixture of both, and I couldn't help but admire her.

I watched her earlier as she kissed her daughters and in-laws before they departed, her tenderness and love evident. The fact that she had daughters meant she needed my protection even more. Clearly, she didn't see it my way.

"Why would you want to get married?" she questioned me, sincerity in her voice. "And why me?"

"I'm in my forties; it is time for me to get married and ensure an heir."

A crimson blush crept up her neck and into her cheeks, and I had to admit she looked beautiful. "Try adoption," she retorted dryly.

I didn't bother answering.

"Don't you have any other candidates?"

"I'm afraid you are the only woman that owes me three million dollars," I purred. She'd settle into her new reality as my wife, eventually. If I had it my way, we'd go to the Justice of the Peace now and get married, but I wanted to do it properly. Leonardo would ensure it was all prepared

quietly so there were no interruptions by her mother's plus one.

She gulped. "But surely, there are other willing women that would be more than happy to marry you and give you… umm, heirs."

"Maybe, but I have my mind set on you." The expression in her eyes was that of desperation. It would be comical if it was anyone else's situation but mine. "What is it going to be?"

I watched her throat move as she swallowed, her chest raising and falling with her heavy breathing.

"So, you either kill me or I marry you," she retorted. "Really, both options are horrible. Marriage would just be a slower death. And heirs… there is no way I am having your kids."

I chuckled at her statement. "Would you rather have a quicker death?" Her eyes widened, watching me as if trying to figure out whether I was joking or not. "Think of it as a contract," I told her. She needed some coercing. "A marriage contract. We'll set the terms, and when the terms are met, you are free to go. We can delay the heirs." *For now. Maybe.*

She eyed me suspiciously. "Just like that? You leave me to go and no heirs."

"Yes, just like that," I assured her. *I never said no heirs*, I thought to myself.

"My kids and me?" She was suspicious, not that I could blame her. "We can just leave."

"Yes." I'd never let her leave.

"How long would we have to be married for?" she rasped. It took her long enough. She was considering my offer, weighing her options. She didn't have many. Actually, she had none. Whether she liked it or not, she would marry me.

"At least two years." Her eyes bulged out of her head. "And an heir."

“That long? I thought you said we can delay an heir,” she whispered. I nodded. The devil is in the details. I’d have to teach my soon-to-be wife that. “Can we make it a year?”

“No,” I retorted. “Two years. We can delay the heir discussion until our second year of marriage.”

I should feel like a bastard for forcing her to do this, but I didn’t. I watched a string of emotions cross her face as she probably considered all her possibilities until she realized she had none.

“O-okay,” she whispered, resignation in her voice.

“We’ll get married a week from tomorrow,” I told her, pulling my phone out of my pocket and shooting a message to Leonardo to get the arrangements going. The sooner this happened, the better. I had a feeling this woman wouldn’t go down without a fight.

“Why so soon?”

My lip quirked into a small smile. “To ensure you don’t run away, princess.”

“I wouldn’t,” she murmured, her eyes darting away from me. She was lying. My woman was a really bad liar.

“My men are watching your girls. Just think about that if you are tempted to run, Bianca.”

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Chapter Nine

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BIANCA

Nico Morrelli was cruel and crazy. There was no other explanation for it.

I had no doubt that he meant his threats. He was just as ruthless as the rumors I heard. Shit, getting out of this situation would be hard. But I would. He hasn't beaten me yet.

"That's too fast to get married," I muttered, commenting on his timeline for the wedding. I needed more time to come up with a plan. The one where I would get the fuck away from this madman and not marry him. "My in-laws won't believe it. Nor my kids."

"They will." He smirked, sure of himself. "You will find that I can be very persuasive."

My heart thundered in my chest, my voice stuck somewhere in my throat. What have I gotten myself into?

"I have business to attend," he said as he straightened his three piece suit that was nothing shy of perfect. I could almost be fooled that he was a gentleman not a mobster. "But we'll have dinner tonight."

"Dinner?" I must have sounded like a damn idiot, repeating his words like I didn't understand what they meant.

“Yes,” he replied without missing a beat. An idea came to mind but, before I could even get excited about it, he continued. “Bear will remain here, guarding you.”

“Guarding me?” There I went repeating his words like a dummy again. “You mean keeping me locked up. And seriously… Bear?”

“Yes; he’ll be your bodyguard.”

Perfectly timed, his two men came back in.

“Bear, this is Bianca, my future wife.” I glared at Nico for just dropping the bomb so casually. I just wanted to buy time and had no intention of walking down the aisle to marry this madman. “Bianca, this is Bear. He is one of my strongest men. He will bring you to me for our dinner where we can discuss our wedding arrangement.”

Jesus, what the hell was happening?

I stared at the man that gave me a jerky nod. That man was a bulldozer, not a bear, with a scar that ran across his left cheek, making him look like a serial killer. Jesus Christ! I shouldn’t be judgmental, but he would scare anyone that came around.

“You can’t be serious!” I hissed, agitation slowly rising inside me. “He can’t stay around here. He’ll scare people away.”

Nico chuckled like I just said the funniest joke. “That’s the point.”

“He’ll scare my girls, my in-laws, my friends.” Instantly, regret flooded me for being so insensitive and I turned to Bear. “Nothing personal, I’m sure you are a great guy. It’s just that my girls don’t like strangers. And you… you-” I stumbled searching for a diplomatic word, “you are a stranger. And you are big. You know, umm.”

I blew out a frustrated sigh. “Damn it.”

“He’s good with kids,” Nico offered. “Has quite a few of his own.” My eyes snapped to the scary dude and he grinned. It was like watching a shark smile.

“You can take your bodyguards,” I mumbled. “We don’t need any. Don’t want any.”

“Your safety comes first. It’s non-negotiable, Bianca,” he warned with a drawl. I opened my mouth to argue but he cut me right off. “Now obey me, or I’ll have to spank your ass to put you in line.”

My eyes just about bulged out of my head.

“What the fuck do-” I cut myself off at his threatening gaze.

He took a step forward as if he was ready to follow through with his threat and punish me for my disrespect. Instinctively, I took a step backwards and something in my stomach clenched. This man unsettled me. I kept telling myself it was in a bad way, but I wasn’t so sure.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. This was so damn wrong.

He’s a criminal, Bianca!

My brain shouted at me to be careful, scared out of my ever-loving mind. He was a step too close in the wrong direction. A wrong move would ruin my girls’ life. There was nothing I wouldn’t do to keep them out of Benito King’s reach and radar.

“Okay, glad we got that settled,” he said.

Not by a long shot! But I kept those words to myself. Without another word, he walked out of my house like he owned it, his own bodyguard close behind him.

“I’ll do a parameter check,” Bear broke my stupor of staring after the man that just turned my entire world upside down. “I won’t bother you. I’ll be out front.”

Turning my eyes to him in resignation, I shook my head.

“When you are done doing whatever, just come back in. I’ll have coffee for you, and I’ll make you some cookies.” His eyes darted to all the glass cookie jars full of homemade chocolate chip cookies, and I rolled my eyes. “Stress baking,” I muttered. “I’ll make you a fresh batch to take home to your children.”

He smiled his shark smile, and I turned to my sink, getting straight to work.

Keep enemies close, Bianca.

It was what my mother always said. I intended to follow that advice until I could have them all on a separate continent.

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Chapter Ten

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BIANCA

It had been less than six hours since I last saw Nico Morrelli, and here I was getting ready to see him again. Twice in a day was too much. Damn, twice in a lifetime was too much. I have been thinking through all the possibilities, trying to figure out how to divert the upcoming catastrophe, and I came up with nothing. Zip. Nada!

I baked three dozen homemade chocolate chip cookies and three dozen Christmas cookies. Before Halloween even came knocking at my door! Yet no bright ideas came to mind.

It's not over yet. I have a week.

I could survive this; just as my mother survived Benito King for the past twenty-six years. I couldn't let this man see that I was afraid of him. My girls needed me. Running and hiding without money would be impossible.

So here I was in downtown Annapolis meeting Nico Morrelli. As he requested. For a forced dinner date!

Bear pulled in front of the restaurant, uncaring of the traffic jam. I could practically feel his eyes on my back, urging me to go in.

I stood in front of the Lewnes' Steakhouse, my reflection in the Lily Pulitzer dress staring back at me. My petite

frame was too thin, my dark brown hair fell down in loose waves to my shoulders. My brown eyes watched in wonder, amazed how put together my exterior looked to the mess that was brewing inside of me.

Why would Nico Morrelli want to marry me?

It was the question that kept repeating in my mind. Instinctively, I knew the story about the money was bullshit. It wasn't as if he hurt for money. And he didn't want me for my looks.

There was absolutely nothing special about my looks - just an ordinary woman with an ordinary life. I didn't have any real connection to the mafia that people knew about, so I couldn't offer him any benefits there.

So why?

It was four in the afternoon, but exhaustion lingered heavy on my shoulders. I saw no way out of this arrangement, not without major disruption to the girls' or their grandparents' lives. William's parents have already lost their son; I couldn't bear to disappear on them. They loved their granddaughters and the twins adored them.

If only I could turn back time and refuse Angie's invite for lunch.

With a deep breath at the pointless wishes, I pushed the door and entered, immediately greeted by a hostess.

The moment I gave the name of Nico Morrelli for reservation, the hostess gave me a blinding smile. She strutted off towards the open floor plan restaurant, and I followed in silence, my nerves teetering on the edge with each step I took. This place wasn't as stuffy as the restaurant where I met him, but its customers were just as wealthy.

It had been so long since I had been on a dinner date, I felt almost at a loss. Strangely, I was not seated in the restaurant lounge area but ushered into a private dining room with a table set for two. I would have preferred the

lounge area where other customers were. At least there were witnesses there.

The hostess motioned with her hand for me to enter the room and without another glance at me she left. I slowly walked in, my eyes on the empty table set for two. The room was dimmed and the light smell of fresh flowers was in the air. I walked to the chair but instead of seating myself, my hands clutched the frame of the chair.

I should run now before he comes. Maybe Bear wasn't in the front of the restaurant, and I'd take a cab to the Carter's house. And then we leave the state. I could run now. Maybe William's parents could come along.

"That's fine, get me the details tonight." My head whipped in the direction of the man's voice and my eyes met his. There was cruelty in those silver depths but also beauty that could pull me into a web of trouble. This physical impact he had on me was wrong and unhealthy, on so many levels.

As if he knew what I contemplated, a knowing smirk played around his beautiful, sensual lips.

God, he looked like sin, that sun kissed skin lickable. He looked amazing in his fitted, expensive suit, but I bet he looked even better without it. I wondered what kind of tattoo he hid under those clothes, and instantly my cheeks warmed imagining him naked.

I gulped hard. Jesus, my hormones decided to kick in at the wrong time. And with the wrong man.

Stop it, Bianca! Any man with the last name of Morrelli is the wrong man!

The harshness lurked in his hard features, just like a hint of ink on his neck under his collar. It was undeniable he was dangerous. How could anyone possibly miss it? Yet, I couldn't take my eyes off of him.

Sweet Jesus Christ!

Nico Morrelli stood by the window behind me, his eyes watching me with too much intensity. He ended his call and

walked up to me, stopping barely a foot from me. Even with the distance he towered over me. I should feel threatened, knowing he blackmailed me into this arrangement and knowing everything I did about the world he ran.

Yet for some stupid reason, I felt safe. *Mental check needed!*

I knew that no man from that world was safe. They used women like property and discarded them when they no longer needed them. Well, that wouldn't be me and my girls.

"Hello, Bianca." At the sound of his deep voice, I blushed harder and a shiver ran down my spine.

Goddamn this body of mine. Nobody ever impacted me like this, not even William, and I'd loved him forever. Except... once, when I went dancing with friends during college summer break. My eyes connected with a man across the club and this same reaction I had to Nico Morrelli happened.

No, it couldn't be. No way! I eyed this man in front of me, comparing him to the man I shared a fleeting glance with all those years ago. He couldn't be the same man! This man took what he wanted. I knew as well as I knew my name. The man in the club wanted me, yet he never made a move.

How many times had this man in front of me taken what he wanted without a second thought? Like now, for example. He blackmailed me into marrying him, without regard to consequences to me or my family. Nico's broad, wide shoulders carried the responsibility and fate for so many people. And now my girls and I were one of those people. One snap of his fingers, and boom. We could be dead. If only I could convince him that somehow this marriage was a bad idea. For so many reasons.

One of them, though the least important one, was that my body seemed to think it was time to end my celibacy since William's death. I still remembered how hard Nico's

body felt when I bumped into him, sending my body into overdrive. I worried I might jump him and make the fantasies a reality from all those nights when I touched myself thinking about him.

What an idiot I was! I got myself off thinking about a mobster's hands on me. Except the man in my fantasies wasn’t a mobster. Just a gloriously hot man that made my insides clench with need.

I swallowed hard, my insides on fire.

“Hello,” my voice slightly shook, my nerves getting the best of me.

Unsure how to greet him, I just stood there. Should I shake his hand? This was a completely new situation for me. It wasn’t as if we were lovers. *Except in my fantasies.*

Not fucking helping my case, Bianca.

The man in my fantasies might have looked like Nico Morrelli, but it wasn’t him. Thankfully, while my internal battle went on, Nico took the lead, leaning over kissing me on the cheek.

Shit! His mouth felt good on my cheek, his scent invading all my senses and my pussy clenched with need.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

My heart raced at his touch and an involuntary gasp left my lips. I took a quick step back, his smell enveloping me. The scent of the deep forest, dark and sensual, and my damn body loved it.

Brakes Bianca! I had to put a stop to any touching and kissing. For two goddamn years!

“Hello,” I repeated.

His lips tugged up into a small smile, like he was enjoying himself. Of course, he would be enjoying himself. He wasn’t at anyone’s mercy. I bet the world revolved around him and his demands while people that had the unfortunate luck to get on his radar had to scramble to survive him. God, I hope I survived him.

“Shall we sit down?” he asked, motioning to the table.

I nodded and he pulled out my chair like a gentleman. I slid into it with my back stiff and a forced smile on my lips, uncomfortable by this unfamiliar situation I found myself in. He sat opposite of me, his gaze never wavering.

The waiter came in with the menus, poured sparkling water for both of us, and took our drink order. Nico… I cringed at calling him by his first name. Should I call him Mr. Morrelli? He ordered a bottle of wine and the waiter left us our menus.

I nervously chewed on my lip. I should have said something, but my mind drew a blank. The girls and William had been my world, my everything, for so long, I wasn't sure there was anything else in the world for me. I was always happy just being a mother and a wife, but now, I desperately tried to get out of being a wife to this man.

Grabbing the glass, I took a sip of water while watching him. He seemed perfectly comfortable while my nerves practically teetered on the edge.

"How was your day?" Seriously, Bianca! Of all the questions, that was the best one that I could come up with. I should have started with let's talk about an alternative approach to settling my debt.

"It was very good, thank you. How about yours?"

"Um, good." If you didn't consider that I was having dinner with a mobster, I was on the brink of losing my house, and apparently was getting married in a week. Instead of searching for possibilities where my girls and I could live or run away too, I spent my day baking cookies for a scary bodyguard and digging through my closet trying to figure out what to wear for dinner.

"Thank you for meeting me," he started.

"I wasn't aware I had a choice," I shot back tartly, making him huff a soft laugh.

That small sound made my body vibrate with a need I didn't understand. I didn't like it. *This man is dangerous*, I reminded myself. I was in way over my head and the little

control of my life I had, started slipping through my fingers.

“You are right,” he replied calmly, a smile on his full lips. “This date and our wedding are happening.”

“We shouldn’t get married,” I answered instead, my voice too hoarse for my liking. “It’s a big step.”

“I agree,” he announced and my heart fluttered with hope. “It is a big step, and rest assured, Cara Mia, I will be a committed husband.”

I groaned at that comment.

“Bianca,” I said, agitation clear in my voice. “Just call me Bianca. None of the endearment crap.”

There was no reason to pretend we meant something to each other. And we both knew that commitment in the mafia basically meant, the man did whatever he wanted and the woman just pretended it was okay. That was not what I wanted for myself, nor my girls. Or maybe it would be better if he sought other women while I derived a plan to escape.

Ugh, this is so confusing!

My eyes darted to the door at the sound of the knob turning, noting the waiter had come back to take our order. I haven’t even opened the menu.

“Are we ready to place an order?” The waiter asked, glancing between the two of us.

“Would you like another minute, Cara Mia? I want you to be ready, Bianca.” *Bastard.* My name on Nico’s lips melted my insides and caused tingling between my thighs. All these contradicting signals between my body and brain gave me a headache.

Shifting uncomfortably, I quickly replied, ignoring my body. “No, it’s okay. I’ll just have a salad please.”

“Great choice.” The waiter’s eyes warmed on me and he gave me a bright smile.

Offering a smile in return, I added, “Dressing on the side please.”

“Of course.” He leaned closer to me. “May I suggest our house dressing?”

The waiter was fairly close to me now and I got a whiff of his overpowering cologne. I shifted slightly away with a reserved smile on my face. “Sure, thank you.”

“The woman is not on the menu,” Nico snapped, bringing both our gazes to him. He was glaring daggers at the poor waiter. “Stop drooling over her.”

I gasped. I didn’t see that one coming. I mean, yes he got a bit too close but some people had different perspectives on personal space.

The seconds ticked, and my heart squeezed with terror. He wouldn’t just shoot the waiter. Would he?

Damn it, I needed to do a detailed search of ‘shit mobsters do.’ Or just on this man because Nico was crazy for sure.

“My apologies,” the waiter quickly uttered, backing away from the table like we were both rabid dogs.

“No,” I stopped his apologizing. “You have nothing to apologize for. We are sorry.”

I glared at the man sitting across from me, but he didn’t bat an eye. *Have I lost my mind?* Yes, probably. I went to open my mouth, but he held out a hand, silencing me and setting a match to my anger. Who in the hell did he think he was?

Well, duh. A fucking mobster.

“What kind of salad?” The waiter’s question interrupted our glaring contest.

“Any salad,” I replied, clearing my throat, working hard to simmer my rage. “Just no bacon in it.”

It wasn’t as if I had much of an appetite at this point. The waiter nodded and turned his attention to Nico. It didn’t take a genius to guess this guy would rather be anywhere but serving us right now.

“And you, Sir?”

Thankfully, Nico knew exactly what he wanted and recited his order of risotto and Bistecca alla Fiorentina with precision and speed. It seemed the world bowed to Nico Morrelli. He was so different from anyone I had ever been around.

Yes, he was a jerk, but you had to admire that determination edged on the features of his face.

Did I know what I wanted? When I had to decide on my degree, I struggled. I had no passion for anything. So I settled for a general studies degree, until I finally made up my mind. Reluctantly. I didn't have a favorite food; I didn't have a favorite color.

I had my favorite people though. Grandma and my dad, Mom, my girls, William, his parents, and John. Those were my top favorite people in the whole wide world. Yes, Grandma, Dad, and William were gone. It physically hurt how much I missed them, but I was still lucky to have had them.

I raised my eyes and met Nico's gaze, noting that the waiter was gone. He probably couldn't wait to clear out of here. I certainly couldn't blame him. I wanted to clear out of here too, except I had a feeling this man would give chase. Scratch that. He *would* give chase. After all, didn't he tell me he liked the chase.

"That wasn't necessary," I finally muttered. For some reason, I felt it important to stand up for myself; otherwise, this man would eat me alive. "Being so rude to the waiter. Or me."

He raised his eyebrow, studying me. I wondered what he saw on my face. Could he see I was all false bravado?

"Not that you give a shit," I mumbled under my breath, more to myself than him. I guess the product of being alone so much lately; I tend to talk to myself a lot.

"I don't like to share." Nico's voice dropped low. "I apologize if I made you uncomfortable."

I wasn’t sure if I should be happy or scared at his apology. Should I tell him I didn’t like to share either? That might dissuade him from this marriage nonsense. I swallowed uncomfortably, while my pulse thundered in my ears. *What have I gotten myself into?*

“He wasn’t asking you to share anything.” I shook my head in disbelief, but kept my voice soft. This man must have a reason for acting like that. “He was just being friendly.”

“Too friendly,” Nico grunted.

I blinked, confused with this mobster and all the weird signals he was sending my way.

“Ever cheated on your husband?” His question caught me off guard.

“No, of course not,” I replied, offended that he would even ask that. If he noticed it, he ignored my indignation.

“Did he cheat on you?” The question sent a slash of pain through my heart, and for a second, it felt like it bled all over again. That specific period was a hard time in both William’s and my life. It was around the time I lost my father. I struggled with the revelations and consequences that came from that. More often than not, I spent my nights stressed out, baking and crashing on the couch rather than going to the bed I shared with William. The twins went through a stage where nights were hard too, and somehow William and I grew apart.

“Ah, so he did,” Nico concluded perceptively. Damn him!

My brain shouted to be careful around him, before he became my demise. I didn’t need any more heartaches or stress. I just had to survive this intact.

“My marriage is my business,” I snapped back in annoyance and anger. It was my only defense, and I blamed Nico for opening the wound that had healed. I didn’t want to remember it.

“Ah, Cara Mia,” he purred, but I sensed darkness around him rising. I gritted my teeth at his endearment. He

ignored my request not to call me that. Even his eyes darkened, with dangers lurking in their depths. “You are my business. Everything about you is ***my*** business.”

My brain shouted through speakers to retreat, but my mouth failed to listen.

“We are not married.”

“Yet,” he said. “But very soon.”

“It’s just a temporary contract,” I reminded him. This man was dangerous, bad news. How did it come to a marriage contract?

He grinned like a Cheshire cat, and it made me feel like he knew something important that I did not. When he didn’t elaborate, I couldn’t resist prodding at it.

“Why the marriage?” I breathed in a whisper, trying to understand.

I couldn’t comprehend why he was so adamant about getting married. It didn’t make sense why, of all the women in this world, he would want to marry me. I sensed there was something he was keeping from me. Something more than it being about the money William stole. If only I could find out what, it might give me leverage.

“One thing you can be sure of, Bianca,” I noticed he ignored my question, “I will protect you and your girls; and I will never cheat on you with another woman.”

The dumb part of me almost melted, finding his comment oddly sweet. But the smarter part of me scolded the dumb part. He was forcing me to marry him. This would be a temporary arrangement, and if I played my cards right, I’d end it even before the two years were up.

“And who will protect us from you?” I asked in a low voice.

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Chapter Eleven

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NICO

"You won't need protection from me," I told her honestly. "You and our children will always be my priority." The look she gave me told me she didn't believe me. Not that I blamed her.

Yes, I was using her to get what I wanted, but I meant it when I said she would have my protection. With each second that went by, she got under my skin more.

The pained expression when I asked the question about her husband's fidelity told me that the wound caused by her husband hadn't healed. Not that I could blame her. If I had known her husband was a cheater when I saw her that stormy night, I would have finished him right there and then and taken her for my own.

Although I found it odd that her husband's infidelity didn't come up in the detailed report I requested on him and Bianca. I'd have to check into that.

My eyes traveled over her petite frame, admiring her natural beauty. She barely wore any make up and unlike other women that clung to me, there weren't traces of deceit or greed on her face.

Bianca Carter, soon to be Morrelli, pleased me immensely. Bear had given me an update of her activities all day. Apparently, my future wife baked when stressed

out. That explained the abundance of cookies all over her house. A perfect housewife!

Unlike her house, my own home was empty and the knowledge that she and her daughters would fill it soon settled me in a strange way. I didn't want to see anything happen to this beauty. Sixteen months ago, when I spotted her, at her doorway, seeing her husband's friend off into the stormy night, she took my breath away. Literally. I couldn't believe she was so close to me again.

I often wondered if she recalled the night we first saw each other. It was a fleeting moment so many years ago, but it almost felt like it was destiny offering her to me. I tried to do the right thing and not touch her, but now it haunted me.

Once I learned Bianca was Benito's daughter, I regretted not pulling Bianca into my world after that night all those years ago. Ever since I learned about facts on Belles and Mobsters arrangement, I had to wonder whether there was a debt Bianca's family was repaying. After all, her family roots in Italy were not exactly far outside this crime world. So far I came up short, but my hunch was telling me there was something there.

I recalled the stormy night from two years ago when her husband and his friend stole the money. As I watched her from my yacht, the light from the inside threw a soft glow over Bianca's petite frame. Even from the shadows, she stunned me with her beauty. She stood in the shadows of the turbulent night, illuminated by the soft lights. A metaphor and a sign, if you fucking asked me. Maybe it was a sign to guide me to her light and my revenge. She felt like my destiny, a woman I should have danced with all those years ago when I first saw her in my club and had her as mine ever since.

Bianca's husband and his friend were idiots, to think they could take a bag full of money and it wouldn't be noticed. It was a test of their loyalty, and a trap I carefully

laid in my attempt to get closer to Benito King's daughter. It didn't surprise me that William failed. The plan was to watch them take the money, approach the married couple and force them to play into my game of revenge against Benito. I was going to use them.

Leonardo attached a tracking chip to the bag, which allowed us to follow its location and listen to their conversation as they kept trying to justify their decision. Both of those morons should have listened to Bianca, but they thought they knew better. Ready to make William pay for stealing from me and use Bianca to pay for his mistake, it was Bianca's conversation with her husband that stopped me in my tracks.

He was already a dead man. The background check on William didn't have his medical history. It was a surprise to hear about his sickness that night. So, I let it go. One of the few decent things I have done in my life. Leonardo was the only man that knew about it. And despite that, even through the pitch-dark night, something pulled me to Bianca as she cried in her husband's arms. I knew I couldn't have her. So I wrote off six hundred thousand dollars and postponed the revenge plan. After all, I was a patient man. I walked away, leaving the Carter family to their own life. For the time being.

Then Bianca bumped into me at the restaurant. It was by design that I was there, but what were the odds that the woman I watched from the shadows would land right into my arms? Literally.

Seeing her had been like the best punch in the gut. She was stunning, those glittering dark eyes and lush lips tempted me. I knew I had to have her.

Bianca was meant to be mine.

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Chapter Twelve

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BIANCA

Nico's eyes on me made me want to fidget with my hands, stand up, and move around, but I forced myself to sit still. Forcing my smile, I prayed that this man wasn't seeing too much. I didn't want him to be aware of my physical attraction to him. I chalked it up to my long abstinence.

Clearing my throat, I decided I needed to stop lingering, like a leaf in the wind. If it turned out I was unsuccessful getting away before the wedding, I needed to know expectations. I didn't want to piss him off and lose my life in the process. I refused to be killed by any mobster.

"What expectations did you have from this relat-" I cut myself off. No, not a relationship. "This arrangement?"

I wished I was good at reading people; although I had a feeling even if I was, I'd still not be able to get a read on Nico Morrelli.

"Loyalty," he replied simply. "And honesty."

I rolled my eyes. "That's kind of cliché and hypocritical, don't you think?" He raised his one eyebrow and against my better judgment I continued, "You expect honesty, yet you are keeping secrets."

"And how would you know I am keeping secrets?"

I scoffed at that. “You must be. Otherwise, why insist on this marriage?”

“Do you have any secrets, Bianca?” His question caused my heart to jumpstart into a frantic drumming against my chest. I would never admit to him my biggest secret. My only secret was tied to my parentage. I was a bad liar, I’ve known it my whole life, so I didn’t bother uttering a lie.

“That’s none of your business,” I said angrily, against my good sense. Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm myself. It wouldn’t do me any good to piss him off. “Since this would be a contract, can we discuss terms?”

Maybe we could discuss sleeping in separate bedrooms and separate houses. It would be ideal if he envisioned this whole marriage being a business transaction without additional responsibilities in the bedroom. One could always hope. Maybe he could get an heir via adoption.

“Please, lead the way,” he replied, his tone mocking. This man could be a jackass.

“Well, I’d rather not get married so maybe we could start with that?”

He chuckled like I truly meant to joke. I was dead serious. Yes, the man did something to make me want to go all crazy and have sex, but it didn’t mean I ignored the dire situation I found myself in.

“There are business events and business trips that require my attendance.” He really had the sexiest deep voice I had ever heard. It caused my whole body to hum in anticipation of hearing one more sound from him which was completely dumb. *What is wrong with me?* “You, as my wife, will be expected to be by my side.

“Business?” Fear crept up my spine.

“Legal business,” he clarified. “You won’t be pulled into any of my *other* businesses.”

Thank God!

“Okay,” I breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s reasonable if we absolutely need to get married. Of course, the

cancellation of the wedding would be preferable." I was actually proud I was able to think on my feet. I had never been one for words or will battling. And my voice sounded somewhat steady. "Anything else?"

I didn't want to flat out ask him if he expected me to sleep with him. That part would be dangerous. I never did casual sex, and William was the only man I had ever slept with.

Hopefully, Nico understood what I was getting at.

"I'll set an allowance of thirty thousand dollars for your monthly expenditures, to spend as you see fit. It will be for you and our children."

My mouth fell open. Thirty thousand dollars a month! For monthly spending. How was that possible? And why did he keep saying 'our children?' The twins were mine. I wasn't planning on having more children, definitely not with him. And he made it sound like he expected heirs right away while earlier he said the heirs would be on hold. Or was this man playing me? I was certain men of his caliber were master manipulators.

There was a catch, I was sure of it now.

"What-" my voice shook now. "What else?"

His expression immediately closed off, his eyes suddenly cold. "Please let me know what else you would like; name your terms. I am willing to negotiate."

With a confused look, I chewed on my lip. I was so lost. Negotiate what terms?

"I don't have terms, short of let's cancel this." His eyes studied me as if searching for a truth. I sighed. "Listen, this whole thing happened unexpectedly. I just want to be prepared and know what I'm getting into. And that's a lot of money for monthly spending. Um, is it just for house bills or-" I stumbled over my own words. "Or something else? And would you text me to let me know when you need me to attend events with you? I don't know where you live, but my place is kind of close to everything."

Why did it feel like I was being stupid here?

“No, I have my accountants paying monthly house bills,” he replied. “And they will take care of your bills too, starting with your mortgage.” My cheeks burned with embarrassment. “You don’t have to worry about any of that,” he continued. “The money is for you to buy what you want for yourself and our kids, Cara Mia.”

I narrowed my eyes. Every word this man uttered was deliberate. I’d stake my life on it. Though I couldn’t accuse him of not being generous. That seemed like an extravagant amount of money just for spending. But I could put it into savings and keep it for rainy days. Because they would surely come. The first chance I got, I’d take my girls and run.

“And you’d text me when you need me?” I rasped, repeating the question, nervous energy swimming through my body.

I preferred to stay in my own home. I should just be direct and ask if he expected us to live together and sleep together. However, if that never crossed his mind, I certainly didn’t want to offer up ideas. It was a tricky balance.

His gaze softened, but the guard never left his expression. Something about the way he watched me made my insides clench, although I wasn’t sure for what reason. Scratch that. No sense in lying to myself. I knew why; I was attracted to him. Dangerously and intensely.

Our food arrived at the moment delaying his answer, and I tried to get myself together.

Oh my Gosh, thirty thousand dollars a month!

I knew it would be greedy to ask him how fast I could get my first allowance. But with the foreclosure letter hanging over my head, I needed to pay the bank as soon as possible. I owed the mortgage company a little over thirty thousand. Of course, they gouged me for all the fees they could tack on.

He said he’d take care of my monthly bills, but I assumed it would start after our marriage. If I could get the money within the next week, I had a chance of saving my house and then his accountant would take care of it going forward. Well, until I come up with the plan and ditch him.

I wanted to save the house for my girls. It was silly to put so much value into something so superficial but part of me clung to it, like a life raft. Considering we’d probably have to disappear in the near future, it made no sense to keep the house. But damn it, I wanted to keep it. Maybe for the girls when they grew up and all the mobsters were dead.

The waiter poured wine in both of our glasses, keeping his eyes averted from me. Not that I could blame him after Nico's obsessive outburst. Pushing the alcohol away, I stuck to my water. I didn’t want alcohol clouding my judgment.

The waiter left and Nico spoke up. “I would like to be honest, Bianca.”

“Yes, please.” I wasn’t sure if I’d like what he had to say. I probably wouldn’t like it, but my mind was already figuring out how I could save my house. Stash up enough money to run away with the girls, and bring Mom and William’s parents along.

If Nico Morrelli wanted to get married, I’d keep up the appearances till I was ready to run. Because there was no doubt in my mind, the day would come when we would have to run.

If Benito King ever realized I was his daughter, he’d come after me. I wouldn’t pretend that I understood why my mother kept that secret from him, but I was grateful. Although, I would have preferred she kept her distance from him. But I understood it wasn’t her choice. She suffered the most here, and it was time I took care of her.

Fucking Benito King has a wife, for Pete’s sake, and kept my mother as a side piece. Why couldn’t he just be happy with one woman and worship her, instead of being greedy

and having a damn harem. I wasn't naive to think my mother was his only side piece. Men like him needed multiple women to make themselves feel important.

"First, you will quit your secretary job." I frowned, slightly agitated that he felt entitled to tell me what to do. Not that I was crazy about that job. "As my wife and a mother to my children," There he went again. "… you will be plenty busy and won't need to work for money. I will need your company during the day events as well as evening," he justified. "I want your commitment to me."

As if he had me under the spell, I just nodded. My life went to hell in a handbasket and all it took was a visit by Nico Morrelli.

"Good," he answered, clearly pleased with my easy compliance.

"What about the schedule for your events?" I asked, hope in my chest refusing to give up. "Maybe we could share a calendar so I can see when you need me."

Before he even answered, I knew his response. I could see it in his eyes.

"We will live together in my house and sleep together in my bed. Leonardo will ensure you have ample time to arrange for a sitter for the events we have to attend." Goddamn hope was a killer every time. I couldn't sleep in his bed. Resisting him without clothes on would be torture. "The babysitters will be screened and approved individuals only. For their safety. I'll have the bedrooms redone for the twins before our wedding day, and I assure you they will love them."

He stared at me intently in a way that scared me. Fire burned in his eyes, making them appear as molten silver. *Everything is going to hell*, my mind whispered.

"In your bed?" I gulped, heat pooling between my thighs. From all the damn things he said, it was what shook me the most.

He took my hand across the table with his right hand, while his left hand went into his pocket. My pulse raced and my eyes darted to where his hand held mine. His touch was warm, his tanned skin in contrast with my pale tone. Again, I caught a hint of ink under his diamond cufflinks.

“Yes, in my bed,” he purred, his voice slightly raspy. “In our bed.”

The thumb of his right hand stroked my skin, his finger against my wrist pulse and he smiled, his eyes searching out mine, taking my breath away.

Keep your cool, Bianca. Don’t melt for him. He’s a killer.

None of those damn pep talks helped.

Nico held my eyes when the cool touch of a metal against the skin of my finger had me gasp. My eyes lowered to see a beautiful teardrop diamond on my finger, where a little over a year ago William’s ring sat.

Too fast. It was all happening too fast.

I lifted my head again, meeting his eyes, and it felt like I was drowning in his stormy gaze, drowning in this situation that spiraled out of control.

I tugged on my hand, but he refused to let me shrink back.

“This time next week, we will be married,” he purred, dark possessiveness lingering beneath the surface.

“It’s too fast.” I felt trapped in a situation that screamed of dangers.

“Two years, Bianca. And I want your complete surrender.” He gave me the most beautiful smile, but I couldn’t help but wince. This was not going well. Not at all. It was like this man knew what to say to draw me into his web.

I swallowed hard. “You expect us to-” I couldn’t even finish the sentence.

“Yes, I expect you to be my wife in every sense of the word.”

Why? It was on the tip of my tongue to ask but it would be redundant. He wouldn't tell me.

I swallowed hard. "What if we are-" I struggled for the right word, "... incompatible. And we can't stand to live together? Or sleep together?"

His mouth barely tilted up, like he was certain that wouldn't happen. "Then we can re-evaluate."

"And we could shorten this agreement?" I asked hopefully. There was no sense in being married if we ended up being incompatible.

"We can discuss it," he replied, never looking away. I mean, he maintained eye contact, so he must be telling the truth. Usually, people couldn't look someone in the eye and lie to them. At least, I couldn't.

I gulped, my throat dry while the adrenaline pumped through my veins.

"Earlier you said you wanted an heir. That's off the table. Right?" Silently, I prayed he said yes. I couldn't have children with this man.

If he said he expected children, I'd have to just tell him to kill me. I couldn't have a kid with him and plan my escape. It was unfortunate too because being an only child, I always wanted a big family.

I was always jealous of my friends that had siblings. Yes, they annoyed each other, but they always stood by them when it counted. There was just some magic to large families and the love they shared. Being an only child was lonely.

Of course, after learning some facts related to my family, I wouldn't have any more kids and subject them to the bullshit agreement.

"If a baby happens, great," his voice portrayed no emotions. "If not, that's fine too."

I stared at him confused. I wasn't sure if that was the right answer or not. He almost sounded like he wanted more children. It didn't matter. I wouldn't have any kids

with him. Having a baby would tie me to him for life. I'd never be able to walk away from my own child.

"Are you shaking your head for a *yes* or a *no*?" he asked.

"I'm on birth control," I told him. It was incredulous that we were having this conversation. "I won't have any more kids. It wouldn't be fair to bring a child into a world where the parents barely know each other." Did that really come out of my mouth? "And your world is not very safe." *Neither is mine*, I added silently.

Besides, if I had another girl, it would be one more person at risk from Benito King. But I couldn't tell him that.

"Firstly, Bianca, you and our children will be protected," he assured me with such confidence that I actually believed him. "My world is where you and our children will be the safest. And when I say our children, I mean the twins too." He studied my face, as if he was waiting for something from me. "Yes, there are some rotten apples in my world, but I will keep them all away. Nobody will dare to touch you and our family."

Did that include Benito King? I wished I could ask him without revealing too much. I didn't know how to explain my blood connection to Benito King and get a confirmation that we were safe from him. Maybe I could somehow play it off to my mother's mistress status to the cruel fucking asshole that happened to be my biological father?

No, I couldn't trust this man. I couldn't trust any of them. To put my fate into their hands would cost me more than just my life.

"Ok," I agreed in a whisper. It sounded like a solemn promise, but I knew I'd break it at the first opportunity. For now, being tied to Nico Morrelli was the necessary outcome for the twins and I.

Maybe I was too naive and stupid to believe him. But didn't Grandma always say that the mafia was big into protecting their own family - whether it was blood family or adopted family. It was pretty much the only good thing she

ever said about them. So, I would go along with it until it was safe to leave.

Well, she also said marriage in the mafia was for life, my mind mocked. Ignoring all the glaring warnings, I focused on the positives. There was only so much shit I could take in a span of a day.

This gorgeous man in front of me was offering an escape. A temporary escape. It was too good to be true, and I knew I should be careful. He had secrets and reasons of his own for doing this. So I'd stash money aside until the opportunity came to take the kids and run. I would get my mom out too.

I was eager for the lifeline I had been thrown and had to be careful how I played my cards.

"You said firstly. What is second?" I asked.

He actually smiled, his perfect teeth flashing at me. I had no doubt, this man could make women lose their minds. I was sure he had women after him. He was power, sex, and money all packaged into a strong, hard, and big body.

"Paying attention to details, I see," he commented with a smile. "I like that." I felt my skin warm up. Yes, I have turned idiotic. "Second, I want you to stop your birth control," he growled, and I winced at his demand. "You always wanted a big family." Shit, how did he know that? "There is nothing stopping us from having one. You are a beautiful, young woman and I cannot wait to take you to bed. I intend to fuck you every day, often and see your belly swell with my child. I want you pregnant." My mouth parted in shock, every thought fleeing me except visions of me tangled up between sheets with this man. As if he was unaware of the impact his words made, he continued, "I want you underneath me, on top of me, anywhere and everywhere. I want to hear you scream my name as I fuck you hard and senseless."

This time my mouth fell wide open, igniting a burning inferno through every fiber of me with his words. Nobody had ever talked to me like this before. Something was seriously wrong with me to find his words so hot. Words that turned me on beyond anything I had ever felt, but I would never dare admit that to him. Or anyone else. My heart beat wildly, and I put my cool hand on my chest as if to calm it. His eyes followed the movement, and I had a distinct feeling he knew the impact he had on me.

“I…I-” What could I say to those words? There was something about this man that aroused me. Desire flamed in my body, unlike anything I had ever felt before. It scared me that just hearing his words had such a strong impact on me. That I wanted him to fuck me.

It frightened me that I was making a mistake and desperation was driving my decisions.

“I thought you agreed earlier… ummm… heirs can wait.” I had to pick and choose my battles here. My instinct was telling me he wouldn’t budge on sex. Fine, he wanted sex; he’d get it. But he wouldn’t get any babies from me. Hell to the no. “That’s a deal breaker for me.”

Like I even had anything to bargain with. Apparently I do; my uterus was my bargaining chip. Talk about fucked up, medieval times. And my girlfriends objected to my love of being in the kitchen as a violation of feminism. I wondered what in the bloody hell this would be!

I could practically hear him moving chess pieces across the board, seeing the whole picture while I played blind and with my hands tied behind my back. Bullshit! I hated this feeling of vulnerability.

“Okay, two years and we can revisit the topic of heirs.” He caved in too easily. He didn’t strike me as a man that gives up.

“So, after two years of marriage, we just go our own separate ways?” I asked again, needing clarification. I lost the sex argument, but I won the more important battle.

Delayed start on an heir with this man so there would be nothing tying us together. Except memories, but I can shove those somewhere deep and dark.

“If that’s the safest option.”

I frowned at his odd reply.

Nico’s motives had red flags blasting in my head. This type of marriage arrangement went against every principal in the mafia. I knew the marriages in their circles were for life. You were in it for life. But then why was Nico making a marriage contract?

“I always thought marriages in the mafia were for life,” I said hesitantly, watching for any betrayal on his face. Any sign that would tell me he was lying.

“For most it is,” he replied, our eyes locked. Was my face betraying me? His expression told me nothing. “I don’t operate like most people.”

I couldn’t decide whether that was comforting or not.

“Ok,” I answered in a soft voice. “I appreciate your honesty.”

Assuming he was honest. Only time would tell. But I wouldn’t trust this man blindly. That could get me killed. I had to take charge of my life and protect my girls at all costs. The way my mother protected me. But unlike her, I wasn’t willing to let my girls grow up without a mother. They needed me, and I needed them.

“I will give you honesty whenever I can, Bianca. Always.”

With a sigh, I nodded. The clause on honesty didn’t escape me, but it wasn't as if I had many options here. Nico Morrelli promised to protect my girls and me from other mobsters. It was counterintuitive to seek protection with one mobster, from another mobster, but my options were limited. So for now, I’d make it work.

While my brain kept warning me about this dangerous man, my sixth sense told me he was sincere in his vow of protection. It was confusing and scary as hell because I was

getting wrapped up in the world I had tried to avoid. It was the world my mother and grandmother worked hard to protect me from.

Staring at Nico's mesmerizing eyes, I wished I could see into his soul to gain the assurance that he would never hurt my girls.

He stood up and came around the table to me.

"We'll be good together," he murmured, pulling me up onto my feet. Like an idiot, my body followed without hesitation and relished in the feeling of his hard body pressed against mine. Arousal burned like an inferno within me, threatening to turn me into ashes. I wanted more of his heat.

What is he doing to me?

I hadn't been intimate with a man since William got sick. Actually, even for months prior to it. The path I took since he died led to loneliness.

Maybe I could enjoy this arrangement with my body while I schemed my own plan. Was it so bad to take advantage of what Nico Morrelli had to offer and enjoy it while it lasted? As long as I kept it physical and not become emotionally entangled with him, it could work. I just had to hope I could survive him.

I couldn't give myself to Nico so carelessly. I knew from what my grandmother and mother told me… men in the mafia do not remain faithful. What they want, they take. Eventually, regardless of what Nico said, he would see something or someone else he desired and he'd take it. Just as he was taking me now. So I'd put limitations on this… marriage. God, I could barely think of it as marriage.

Eventually, I'd leave him. Whether I wanted to or not, I would have to run in order to protect the girls.

His lips lowered onto my neck and to my shock a sigh escaped my lips. A shiver danced across my back as he licked my pulsing vein there and my eyes fluttered shut. I wasn't even aware of my head tilting to allow him better

access. His tongue burned my skin, and I wanted more. His touch melted everything in its path. My insides ached and that sweet spot between my legs throbbed with need. I had never felt something like this before.

Too easy! He had me melting in his arms too effortlessly.

His hands on me felt possessive and claiming. I felt the friction of his strength and his large hand gripped the base of my neck, holding me immobile. Power oozed from his every touch. He made me delirious. I pressed into him, his body a rock of hard muscle. I melted into his embrace, needing him more than anything else right now.

My fingers gripped his shoulders, desperate as a throbbing ache awakened between my thighs. I was just a puppet under his expert touch. And holy shit, his touch ignited every fiber of me. His hands slid the length of my body, reaching for my inner thigh. My heart thundered under my rib cage and his rough palms felt good against my soft skin.

As if in tune with my need, his fingers moved over my panties and a moan escaped me. Cool air brushed against them, making me aware of how wet I was. The thin material was a barrier I wanted gone. His fingers slid under the lace, touching my most intimate parts. Nobody had touched me in this way in such a long time. His expert fingers teased, sending shudders through my body.

He yanked me closer by the back of my neck, my breathing erratic.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he growled in my ear.

I wanted more from him. At the same time that his thumb pressed down on my clit, he nipped my neck, hard, and a yelp escaped my lips. His grip tightened on my nape, as he slid a finger inside me, the flame spreading through my blood. I was so hot everywhere, it felt like being in the midst of a wildfire with no way of escape.

He brushed his thumb up and down my clit, his big hand holding a fistful of my hair and deep moans sounded in my

throat. I would have been embarrassed if I had an ounce of sanity left. My hips rocked against his touch, my body greedy for this sensation he gave me. From the lust-filled haze in my brain, I realized we were moving until something pressed against my back.

His gaze fell between my thighs and his eyes turned dark. He fisted my panties and pushed them down my thighs, dropping them to the floor. Without being prompted, I stepped out of them and spread my legs open. I was way past the point of any rational thought.

His arms wrapped around my waist and lifted me onto a table or counter, I didn't know. But plates didn't go crashing down, so it couldn't be where we were seated. Then his head lowered between my thighs and his tongue touched my entrance. My body seared into flames as a deep rush of pleasure flooded me. His tongue licked and nipped, my hips bucked forward desperate for more, but his arms held me securely so I couldn't move.

He swirled his tongue over my clit, and my hands reached into his thick hair, running my nails against his scalp.

"Oh my God," I moaned, a throaty noise unfamiliar to my own ears. His expert tongue kept switching between swirling and sucking my clit, taking me higher and higher. This must be what heaven felt like because I was so high. He slid a finger inside me, moving it in and out, and a tremor shook my body. The noises coming from him made it sound like he was doing this for himself, not for me.

My hands tugged at his hair, begging for more. I was so close, I'd thought I'd explode. The pressure built with each of his steady laps and he fingered me faster and harder until hot pressure exploded through my bloodstream and fire dissipated into ashes.

My pussy pulsed around his fingers, my body slack and sated. A shaky breath let out of my lips as reality of what

had just happened slowly descended through my lust filled brain.

His smoldering gray gaze found mine, and my heart drummed under my rib cage, threatening to crack it. I had never experienced such an earth shattering orgasm in my entire life. It left me gasping, breathless, and wanting more.

While I sat there disheveled, my dress scrunched up around my waist, my thighs and pussy on full display, Nico stood there in his three-piece suit. Pristine and unaffected.

Fuck, I am in way over my head.

The sound of the door opening barely reached my ears but Nico's senses were sharp. Before I realized what was going on, he pulled me closer, sheltering the view of me with his body.

"Get the fuck out," he barked, startling both the waiter and me.

"I apologize," the waiter's voice sounded as embarrassed as I felt.

As the door shut, I could have buried myself. My body still burned with desire but even stronger was shame. How could I have let it go that far? I pushed him away, sliding off the table. I needed space between us, but I could only take one step backwards and the counter where he just ate me bumped into the back of me.

I let out a shaky breath, running my fingers down my dress. My panties lay discarded on the floor and the dumbest thought pierced through my brain. *The floor is dirty, there is no way I'm putting those on again.*

Maybe it was the sunken realization of the consequences and aftershock.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I let my desire take it too far. This wasn't the time nor place."

It wasn't just him though. I was quite a willing participant, and I let it go so damn far. I had to go. I couldn't sit through dinner with him. I needed to leave and

get my reason back. I needed space from this man before he overwhelmed all my senses. And I needed my goddamn panties!

"That's ok," I murmured, my voice slightly breathless. "Do you mind if we cut our dinner short? I have to go."

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Chapter Thirteen

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NICO

I had never been in the habit of making women bend to my will. My money, power, and looks ensured I got what I wanted. But Bianca… her resistance to become mine clawed at me, demanding her submission. And sweet heavens did she ever!

Everything about her was intoxicating. Her soft porcelain skin, full red lips that called to my cock, and those eyes that shone like dark pools of chocolate. This intense reaction to this woman was unexpected. It caught me by surprise. I knew there'd be attraction, I sensed it from the moment I laid eyes on her. But this… this was something entirely different. She tasted like the sweetest honeysuckle. The beast inside me demanded that I quench this need for her body, show her long nights of the most pleasurable sins.

The moment my hands touched her, all the blood left my brain and went straight to my cock. She was intoxicating. I had never in my entire life lost my control as I did just now. I needed her in my bed, to sate this lust with her fingernails on my back and her body submitting to me.

Mine. One word. And a whole lot of meaning behind it.

The fact I was using her didn't matter to me. Nor that I was lying to her. The end justifies the means. Bianca Carter

was Benito King's precious daughter. Granted, he had yet to learn of her existence. I intended to make her father pay for what he had done to my sister. And what better way than to take the only daughter he has. She would be more precious to him than his legitimate son. Bianca's mother has done an outstanding job keeping her hidden from the crime world but not from me.

"Do you mind if we cut our dinner short?" Her voice was a soft plea. "I have to go."

Instinctively, I knew she wanted to get away from me, looking for solitude to get her desire under control. Too fucking bad! She wanted to understand what happened to her, shocked by her response to me, but I refused to let her hide. I wouldn't let her because I'd take it all from her. She didn't have a choice in the matter.

I always took what I wanted, and she was mine for the taking.

I couldn't stop looking at her. The taste of her made this need to claim her tenfold. Her skin was flushed from desire that she didn't want to feel. Her breathing was still ragged, her warm brown eyes shining, her lips swollen, and her pale skin marred by my stubble.

It made my balls tighten just looking at her.

She didn't even realize how fucking sexy she was, and she wasn't even trying. This woman was quickly becoming my obsession. I never expected to experience an all-consuming passion. The way her body responded to me, her little sighs and moans… I wanted to hear it all again.

"I will drive you home," I told her. I hated that she was cutting our time short, that she was running from me. Not that I would ever let her. I'd chase her to the corners of this earth and claim her. Over and over again.

I let her walk away from me twice. A third time wouldn't happen.

"No need, really," she quickly replied. "You haven't even touched your meal."

My gaze dropped down her body. “Oh, I had a meal,” I purred. “The most delicious pussy ever.” She flushed crimson but refused to break eye contact. *Fuck!* Maybe I could eat her out one more time. I needed to screw her hard, sooner rather than later. So I could keep my head clear, because right now my brain and dick were lust infused. For her!

“No need to be crude,” she snapped, her cheeks getting impossibly red.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. No woman ever spoke to me like she did.

“We’ll eat together, or we’ll leave together,” I replied to her earlier comment.

Her eyes traveled to the table then back to me. The food was already sitting there. I could see all her emotions reflected on her face… sorrow, embarrassment, regret, lingering desire. I didn’t want to see any regret or embarrassment on her face, just the desire and passion she was hiding so carefully. I might not love her, but the fires we would ignite together would be explosive.

Fuck, I couldn’t wait to get this woman into my bed. The marriage couldn’t come soon enough. The thought of me being her last felt right.

A heavy sigh left her luscious red lips and her shoulders slumped. I knew she resigned to her faith before the next words left her mouth. “Ok, let’s eat dinner then.”

I had to hide my smile. *Good girl!* Being Benito King’s daughter, she had to have inherited some backbone. Otherwise, she wouldn’t survive the fucking storm that would rain upon us. My sixth sense told me she was even stronger than I gave her credit for.

Her panties lay discarded on the floor and her eyes locked on them. “I can’t put those back on,” she muttered to herself.

I picked them up and shoved them in my pocket. “I agree,” I told her, keeping my voice even, while my cock

throbbed for her. “I like the idea of you being bare under your dress while you eat dinner with me.”

Her lips parted and her cheeks turned even deeper red. I wondered if her ass would be a similar shade when I put my palm to it. Or next time I bury my head between her thighs and she has to beg me to let her come.

Fuck!

I had to stop thinking about it.

I helped her back to her seat before seating myself. Her little dress with bright flowers hugged her body. She was beautiful, unlike any other woman in my world full of power and greed. But I knew the innocence of women was easily corrupted. I had firsthand experience with that.

We watched each other, neither one of us reaching for our silverware, her eyes darting away from me. She wanted to hate me, but her body refused to. It craved me as much as I craved her.

A soft sigh. “I’m sorry,” she finally said. Her voice was soft and low and her tongue swept across her bottom lip. The image of her plump lips tasting my cum flashed in my mind. Goddamn it, I reacted like a horny teenager around her.

“Why?” I had to keep a tight lid on my desire. For now. I wanted nothing more than to sink into her warm, tight pussy and lose myself completely. Once she was mine, I’d fuck her into oblivion.

“I don’t know what possessed me,” she murmured. Her voice alone was enough to give me another aching hard on.

“Don’t ever be sorry about that,” I told her. I’d ensure she’d crave me until her dying breath. I wanted to hear her soft voice begging me to fuck her, see her lush lips wrapped around my cock.

Her neck and face flushed in response as if she saw the images in my mind.

There might be a lot of things she could be sorry about, but this wasn’t one of them. I loved that she’d lost control.

Her body's response to me was honest and refreshing, sexy as fuck. I couldn't wait to put the wedding band on her finger and make her Mrs. Nico Morrelli.

"We should probably discuss some additional terms." I tried to find a topic to focus on, rather than her body and how it responded to me. Her eyes finally came back to me.

"Ok."

"Bear will be your permanent bodyguard. We'll pick one for your twins too, after we come back from our honeymoon." Her eyes flashed with surprise. The cascade of her dark hair framed her face down to her neck. She kept fidgeting and moving her hair out of her face and away from her neck. I would bet a million bucks she kept her hair up most of the time. An image flashed in my mind, her neck bare to me as I bent her over our bed and thrust into her, her eyes darting to me over her shoulder, worshiping me. The tie around my neck suddenly felt too tight. I needed to get a grip around this woman.

"Do we need a honeymoon?" she questioned, her cheeks flushed.

"Yes." She took her lower lip between her teeth, nibbling. "Is that a problem?" I questioned her.

The look she gave me was cautious. "How long of a honeymoon? I don't know if their grandparents can watch them for an extended period."

"Four days. If they can't watch them, I can find a sitter."

"No." She sat up straighter, her eyes flashing with annoyance. "I won't leave my kids with strangers."

"They wouldn't be with strangers," I tried to soothe her. I appreciated the protectiveness of her daughters.

"Whoever you have in mind, is a stranger to me," she retorted dryly. "And to my kids. So that will be a hard no."

I scratched my face, in an attempt to hide a smile lingering on my lips. It had been a while since anyone, never mind a woman, stood up to me. I couldn't say that I minded it with Bianca. It told me she felt comfortable

enough with me to get her point across. The fact she didn't cower was a good sign for our marriage. And I liked that she was a lioness when it came to her daughters. She'd be a protective mother to all of our children; I knew it without a doubt.

"Fair enough," I agreed. "If their grandparents can't watch them, we'll bring them along."

I watched her eyebrows scrunch, not that I could blame her. It would be unusual to bring children on our honeymoon, but the fact was she had children so they were part of her.

"I have an event going on tomorrow. It is in the morning, and it will be a good way to introduce you as my bride-to-be. Can you make that?"

"Can't you just introduce me as your acquaintance?" she muttered. That answer didn't warrant a response, so I remained quiet. "Fine, fine. What time?"

She had the audacity to roll her eyes.

"You keep rolling your eyes," I warned her, "... and I'll bend you over the table and teach you a lesson."

Her dark eyes widened, her lips parted and her breathing hitched. Her smell of lilacs was all around me mixed with... honeysuckle! She was aroused again! My soon wife-to-be liked it a bit rough. The revelation just about sent me over the edge; the need to bend her over and take her rough right now clawed at my back.

I stared at her, not giving anything away. She could never know the impact she has on me. It made a man in my position weak to care or want someone so much.

"Fine, what time?" she croaked, taking a step away from me. I refused to let her.

"Nine."

The look she gave me was stroking a thousand infernos, sending them blazing through my veins. She slowly nodded. "What should I wear?"

Whatever she wore, she'd be the most beautiful woman there. But that was not a response she was looking for.

"Simple day dress."

"Ok." She started biting her lip, then asked, "How long would you need me tomorrow?"

All day and all night.

"It shouldn't be more than three hours. Will that work?"

She was a mother after all. I couldn't expect her to drop everything and be at my disposal, though there was nothing more I wanted than to keep her in my bed for days. To lick every inch of her body, to taste her and obliterate every man out of her memory till there was only me left in her mind.

"Yes, that should be fine."

"Bear will drive you. It will save you time with parking. I'll also have a woman get in touch with you tomorrow afternoon. She'll make sure to set you up with everything you need for the wedding and my events."

There she went again nibbling on her bottom lip, tempting me. "Ok," she murmured.

"If there is something you do not like or doesn't work for you, Bianca, I want you to tell me. It is the only way this is going to work."

Her eyes held such depths and vulnerability in them, I wondered what she was thinking. My gut feeling was telling me if she wasn't in this financially peculiar situation and my blackmail, she'd never consider this despite her attraction towards me.

"I guess saying this marriage doesn't work for me or that this is crazy was not what you had in mind with that statement."

I couldn't blame her for trying.

"No, it was not."

She inhaled a deep breath, as if she sought courage. "Mr. Morrelli-"

“Nico,” I stopped her. “Call me Nico. After all, I just tasted your pussy, and we are getting married.”

Fuck, I loved seeing her blush. It did things to me in the best possible ways.

“Nico,” she nervously chewed on her beautiful, naturally red lips. It was the first time she uttered my name, and like a teenage boy, I was ready to blow my load into my pants. This woman impacted me unexpectedly. “Do you expect me to sleep with you tomorrow?”

Yes! I expect your pussy to be available to me every day and night, 24/7.

I studied her. The attraction was sizzling between us, but she was resisting it. I would bet my entire fortune, we wouldn’t make it a whole week before I buried myself into her. This raging need was consuming both of us.

“Bianca, my only expectation is to have you be my plus one at tomorrow's event. As my wife, we will attend quite a bit of those.”

Yes, I wanted to claim her as mine, but I needed her willingness. Her submission. It was there, underneath the surface, just waiting for me to unlock it.

She picked up her silverware and slowly started cutting into her salad, and I did the same with my meal. Her emotions were an open book, but her thoughts were a mystery to me. I was accustomed to women throwing themselves at my feet. My looks and money had them flocking to me.

But not this woman in front of me. She’d fight me tooth and nail if she ever learned why I did this.

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Chapter Fourteen

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BIANCA

It was little past seven in the morning, and I threw one more look in the mirror.

I had no idea if I looked the part. The dress was old, but I thought it was a classic. White soft silk fit against my body and flared down from my waist to a little above my knees. A black high waist belt accented the dress and the black shoulder straps left my arms exposed. I had a pink wrap to cover up if I felt too cold. I debated for sandals with heels but then decided against it. It was too early in the morning, and I'd be more comfortable in flats.

I had my hair pulled up in a simple ponytail, leaving my neck exposed. I debated whether I should wear makeup. I had no clue what was normal for these kinds of events. I didn't like the feeling of makeup on my face, so I opted for light blush, mascara, and lipstick. Makeup had been such an afterthought since I had the twins; it felt unusual having it on my face.

All of this still felt unreal. True to Nico's words, by the time we were done with our dinner and Bear brought me home, I had a notice in my email that my mortgage had been paid. Not just paid but paid off.

Paid off in full!

But now I had different worries weighing me down. The upcoming marriage, the news I had to break to William's parents and my own daughters, debating whether I should tell my mom or not. And how to keep my body and heart separated around Nico Morrelli. Because what that man could do to me was… holy smokes. Just thinking about his mouth, his expert tongue on my core had me burning with need. He was too dangerous for my libido.

Nico's touch seared my skin and the kiss was permanently stained on my lips and in my mind. My reaction shocked me, my desire more intense than I had ever felt before. The revelation came with a flood of guilt and a sense of betrayal. I loved William. I missed him more than any words could express. Yet, I had never craved his touch and mouth as I do Nico's.

My intense reaction to Nico concerned me. It was one thing to sleep with him and feel nothing, quite another feeling this flame burning from his gaze. My senses exploded from his touch yesterday. I equally feared it and craved it. I had to get a grip!

The twins were still with William's parents. They'd bring them back around late afternoon. I couldn't wait to see them and dreaded it at the same time. I had no idea how to even go about explaining this sudden turn of events.

Nico's secretary, whoever it was, already sent my notice to my boss. I was annoyed he couldn't leave that up to me. The man moved too fast once he decided on something. It was damn unnerving, like a sudden hurricane sweeping through your life. Of course, the resignation didn't go over well, but it wasn't like I could explain that I had no choice because I stole from a mob boss.

The doorbell rang. I rushed out of my bedroom and down the stairs. When I opened the door, Bear stood there.

"Are you ready, Miss Morrelli?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes at him. "Please, call me Bianca," I muttered. "And you have a wrong last name." He didn't

respond so I glanced around. “Where is the other guy?”

“I just dismissed him,” he replied. Bear explained to me that he’d have someone else watch my house overnight. I felt guilty he spent so much time away from his own family. It was unnecessary to have anyone watch the house. The other man remained outside in the car, and I never really saw him, which was fine by me. It would have been uncomfortable to sleep with strangers under my roof.

Bear showed me to the car, a dark Bentley. I slid onto the soft leather of the back seat. The fanciest car I had ever been in was a ten-year-old Mercedes. Did people really live like this? It seemed surreal.

The clear blue skies stretched over the bay. Something inside me beamed with hope, knowing that this home would be here to stay. Mine forever.

Maybe… just maybe things would work out.

Within an hour we were in downtown Washington D.C., and I was grateful I didn’t have to drive into the city again. It was so much better depending on a driver to get me to the necessary location. Instead of gripping a steering wheel, I was pressing my hands together till they turned white. I was nervous. Each mile brought me closer to Nico, and each hour that passed by brought me closer to the doomed wedding.

But hope lingered in my heart, nonetheless.

Seeing Nico set me on edge. I’d prefer not to see him and keep my distance, at least till the wedding day. The way my body reacted to him wasn’t good.

It threatened the possibility of Nico Morrelli being shoved into a dark corner and being taken advantage of by me. The abstinence I had exercised over the last two years has clearly done me no good. Will and I hadn’t been intimate before he died. We were working through the hurdle of his infidelity before he became really ill, but my hormones were now catching up tenfold. My body couldn’t decide whether to be scared of Nico Morrelli or turned on.

The car came to a stop and the door immediately opened.

“Bianca.” Nico’s deep voice soaked through me and a shiver ran down my spine. It was such a bad reaction to have to this man. Lifting my head, I took his extended hand and met his steel gray eyes. The scent that I became so familiar with in the last twenty-four hours lingered around him, invading my lungs, doing things to me.

He wore his signature, three piece suit with a snow-white, crisp shirt. Like a magnet, my eyes darted to his neck, lingering at the collar of his white shirt. There had to be a tattoo underneath it, I was sure of it, and somehow it made the thought of taking his clothes off and seeing it exhilarating. I wanted to trace the ink with my fingers, or my tongue, his olive skin making my mouth water. Well, there was one huge benefit to marrying this mobster.

Sweet Jesus! Get a grip, woman!

After the little indiscretion in the restaurant yesterday, it was nerve wracking to be around this man again. Yesterday, I lost all sense of time and place as he ate me out in the middle of the restaurant. *Ate me out!* And I wanted more.

Jesus, just thinking about it made me all hot and bothered again. I had to keep some semblance of proprietary. A touch and I was a melting puddle, ready for another round of the amazing orgasm he gave me.

Once out of the car, I gently tugged on my hand and took a small step away. I needed space from this man.

Nico's eyes darkened, and it didn’t escape me that my move displeased him. Ignoring his reaction, I glanced around me to see where exactly I was. Just in case I had to run. You never knew with these mobsters.

Nico tucked his hands deep in his trouser pockets and disappointment pooled in the pit of my stomach. I almost expected him to grab my hand and kiss me roughly. Yes, it was official. *Bianca Carter has lost her mind!*

He looked utterly gorgeous; nobody could blame me for wanting to ravish him. That strong body of his and the muscles I'd felt under my fingertips yesterday. There was nothing out of order when it came to this man. Appearance wise anyhow. The way his suit hugged his body, it made my knees weak, and I had to swallow hard, pushing more inappropriate thoughts out of my mind.

The corners of his mouth tilted up as he watched me, like he could read my mind.

He leaned down, pressing a kiss on my cheek. "You look beautiful," his deep voice murmured against my skin. A shiver ran down my spine, and I went to pull away when he whispered in my ear, "Remember, you are my fiancée. No pulling away."

He put his arm around my waist and gently tugged on my earlobe with his teeth, as if to prove a point. Electricity shot through my body, unlike anything I had ever felt before. Two days around this man! Just two days and I felt more sizzling than I had in my entire life.

What is this man doing to me? I had to get control of my body back.

I looked up at him, lost for words. My entire life was spiraling out of control. Feeling too exposed and vulnerable to this dangerous man, I tried to shove all my worries deep down, somewhere dark, while I held his gaze.

"Shall we?" he urged.

I nodded, and his hand slid down to my lower back as he guided me towards the building. The thin material of the dress was barely a barrier. Everything about him screamed money and danger, while everything about me screamed simplicity. I was way out of my element here.

I'd be the sheep that the wolf ate.

Stop it. I just have to keep my girls safe. And get some nooky while I'm at it.

I silently scolded myself. I was getting out of control here. Maybe it was time I got myself some sex toys and

relieved myself of this sexual tension. I had to do *something*!

“Do you know you have a nickname?” I blurted out, trying to think about anything but his warm, hard body or his hands on me. He raised an eyebrow, waiting for me to continue. “The Wolf.” When he remained silent, I became nervous. “Or something like that,” I muttered. “I didn’t come up with it, just read it somewhere.” I swallowed hard, cursing my stupidity. “Don’t shoot the messenger.”

Tense silence followed.

“Yes, I know about the nickname,” he answered. “Initially I got it because I could sniff out information on anyone. I like the hunt.” Wait, what? Oh, no! I was fucking doomed. “Then it stuck around because supposedly I have the personality traits of a wolf.”

My brows furrowed. That could be taken so many different ways.

“Like what?”

“I always go for the neck.”

“Oh.” Well, that was awkward. I wasn’t quite sure if his answer meant that’s how he killed or something else, and I had no intention of asking him to clarify it.

“Is this where you work?” I asked him instead as we approached the building.

“Something like that. I own it,” he replied.

“Oh.”

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. The Morrellis owned the bulk of prime real estate in Maryland and Washington D.C. I couldn’t even imagine the price tag on prime real estate in downtown D.C. With all the events that happened, I felt like I didn’t do the proper homework on Nico Morrelli, but now I wished that I had. The only thing I knew for certain was that he was ruthless and a criminal.

“So, what else do you do besides being a criminal?” I noted his slightly surprised look.

“You are brave, Cara Mia.” *Or stupid*, I thought to myself. He probably didn’t think I had it in me.

I didn’t know what possessed me to be snarky to him. I couldn't stand the silence and my nerves were pretty much fried and my lust-infested brain made me cranky. Along with the knowledge I’d have to somehow explain to my kids and in-laws about this ridiculous wedding had me all riled up.

“I own a few construction companies, but I spend most of my time buying large parcels of real estate and turning them into business properties,” he told me as he nudged me into his building. “They are all under the company started under my great-grandfather from my mother’s side, Nico Cassidy. I also own Cassidy Tech.”

“That’s right,” I murmured, frowning. “I should have known the construction business would belong to someone like you. Worldwide Cassidy, right?”

“Yes.”

His company pretty much demolished John’s construction company.

John was a close family friend - to both William and I. He was even the best man at our wedding. Local John Construction was in his family for three generations and Nico’s real estate company was pretty much squashing them. Over the last fifteen months, Worldwide Cassidy bought out most of their contracts. I never made a connection between Morrelli and Cassidy. I wasn’t sure if it was even public knowledge.

And Cassidy Tech! They were one of the largest IT companies in the world. The word was they could hide anyone’s footprint on the web, wipe out someone’s entire identity online, and give them a fresh start without ever having to change their appearances. One day you were Bianca Carter and the next someone completely different. Of course, there was no concrete evidence to support those rumors.

So fucking unfair! I could use those services.

Suddenly stopping, I turned to him. “I don’t think I like your company.”

His only reaction was a raised eyebrow. I couldn’t drill him on Cassidy Tech because he couldn’t know that I’d need a new identity one day. But Worldwide Cassidy construction company… for that, I could.

“Your company is huge and you have so much,” I continued, “but instead of allowing for small, local businesses to flourish in healthy competition, you squash them.”

“And where did you get that information?”

“John Martin, owner of Local John Construction, is a family friend. Your company has been after him and hurting his business for over a year. John’s a great guy.”

Something flashed in his eyes, but before I could zero in on it, his jaw tightened, his expression darkened and turned unreadable as ever.

“If I remember correctly,” his response was curt, cold and mocking, “we offered him a very generous package for his company, more than it’s worth on the market.”

I watched this ruthless man that had so much. It was obvious he didn’t need John’s share of the business. People walked all around us, passing us by, while we stood in the marble lobby of his building. Wealth and money all around us; he had way more than the majority of the population on this planet. What could a local small construction business possibly mean to him? It wasn’t even a blip on his radar.

Maybe if I explained to him what that company meant to John, I could help him see that what he was doing was wrong.

“John’s father died building that company.” I didn’t even realize my hand reached out to him and my palm laid flat on his chest. His warmth and musky scent seeped into me, enveloping me. “He worked on his construction projects along with his crew. During one of them, an iron pipe

pierced his chest and killed him. John was only seventeen at that time. You could never put a price tag on that."

I wasn't sure if he listened; his eyes were dark and intent. As I finished speaking, his gaze shifted down to where my hand laid on his chest, and I quickly pulled my hand back. Without another word, he took my hand into his, and we walked to the elevator hand in hand.

I had no clue if I just helped John or made it worse. But he was forgotten the moment Nico took my hand. All my focus was on his big hand holding mine, warmth spreading through my body. Touching this man was like getting sent into a heat wave.

Just one look by him and I was hot all over. Just one touch and I was like a bitch in heat. *Totally not good!*

We entered the elevator, just the two of us, and as soon as the door shut, he pulled me to face him and asked, "Have you been romantically involved with him?"

Utterly confused, I wondered what he was talking about. "Who?"

"John Martin."

"God no," I answered him, staring at him in shock. "John and William were friends, he was the best man at our wedding. He helped us with our house renovation. We were broke and could barely afford the house, but I fell in love with it. All the work in the house was our own sweat and labor."

Why did I just tell him all that?

His eyes were intent on me, as if evaluating if I was lying or manipulating him. I continued on, "I haven't done a good job keeping in touch with him since William's death. John occasionally calls me or swings by the house to check on us. He lives on Gibson Island too, and I see him but he is a family friend. The girls call him Uncle John."

I leaned in closer, watching Nico, as if trying to convince him to believe me. What was it with this man? He constantly made me feel this unreasonable, magnetic pull

towards him. I didn’t tell Nico that I kept everyone away since William’s death, scared of consequences that I was sure would follow from spending the mafia’s money. Nico’s money. And just when I relaxed, karma decided to play.

“Your girls?”

“Yes, my twins.”

I wondered what was going through his mind. This man made no sense to me. He placed his palm flat against the elevator wall. With his other hand, he took my chin between his fingers. Mesmerized, I watched him bend his head towards me, and the moment his lips touched mine, all thoughts left me. My eyes fluttered shut, enjoying all the feelings his kiss brought on. His familiar cologne entered my lungs, and without realizing it, my hands wrapped around his nape, and I pressed my body against his hard muscles.

Languid heat spread through my body. I missed the physical closeness of a man. That had to be the reason I reacted so strongly to him. I have been alone for so long. My mouth parted to let him in. As if he got the permission he needed, his kiss turned hard, his tongue exploring my mouth, teasing, claiming. I loved his heat, our bodies touching. I was under no illusion that I could resist him. If he’d tell me to strip, I feared I’d do it all too eagerly.

My heartbeat drummed in my ears. His lips kissed a slow line down to my neck, while his other hand found itself on my thighs. Every touch and every kiss shot sizzles through my body and between my legs. He ran his large hands down my sides, brushing against my breast and down to my hips. He pulled up my dress, and his rough palm on the soft skin of my inner thigh.

My senses were exploding from the heat and the length of him pressed against me. His erection pressed against my stomach and a thought pierced through my lust-hazed brain. *At least he is as impacted as I am.*

I rocked against him to increase the friction, while his mouth was back on my throat, pressing hot, wet kisses on my skin. My head fell back against the elevator wall, on a soft moan. This man was killing me with his mouth. And his fingers! He brushed them over the thin material of my panties, the only barrier between his expert fingers and my bare pussy.

“Please,” I breathed, needing more. I wanted him so damn much.

He removed the hand that was pressed against the elevator wall and it wrapped it around my neck. The strength of his grip hit me straight to my chest. But I felt no fear. Our eyes met, a sinful gleam in his primitive, hungry gaze as he held me at his mercy. But there was hot desire there too. I’d have him at my mercy too.

I didn’t fear him. At this moment, I wanted every single part of this man, whether it was good, bad, or ugly. I didn’t care. The sane woman within me was gone. I arched, tilting my head back, offering him my neck and a low, feral growl tore from his mouth. His lips crashed back on mine, bruising me with its intensity.

The pulsing cascaded through my veins like an avalanche and ended between my legs. The sweet ache between my thighs grew with each second, demanding to be satisfied. And the emptiness pulsed between my legs, driving me insane with need. Pushing against his rough hand on my pussy, embarrassing noises came from my throat that I have never heard myself make.

From the far corner of my mind, I registered a gasp but desire raged through me, and I ignored it all as I pressed harder against Nico, sucking on his tongue.

“Excuse me,” a stranger's voice startled both Nico and I out of our moment.

“Fuck,” he murmured against my lips. His eyes were dark silver pools, desire in them reflecting what my body felt. His big frame hid me from view.

I slid my arms from his neck, down his hard body, shame and embarrassment burning my cheeks. I lost my control. Every time this man touches me, all my senses flee. It was a dangerous sensation; yet so damn addictive.

“Give us a moment,” he told the man outside the elevator.

My labored breathing was in contrast to his even one. Both of my palms rested against his chest, his heat under my fingertips. I wondered how his skin would feel under my touch. Around him, I felt alive again, a completely different woman. Yet, he seemed put together. If it wasn’t for his erection pressing against me, I would have thought him completely unfazed by what we just shared. He was much better at hiding his reactions than me.

The necessary trait of a criminal, I guessed.

Reluctantly, my hands fell down, missing his body already.

“You okay?” he asked, never moving. He didn’t care about anyone around us. His presence alone commanded obedience and respect, I guessed. Nobody would dare to complain to him for holding up the elevator.

“Yes.” I wanted more of what we just shared but wouldn’t tell him that. I had to keep some semblance of dignity.

As if he heard my thoughts, he placed a gentle kiss on the corner of my mouth. As if he was my magnet, my body leaned against him. I had to stop myself from turning my head to meet his lips. My intense reaction had to be a result of being alone for so long. Otherwise, this man would destroy me, and I’d be extinguished like embers after the flames. He straightened, removing his arm off the elevator wall and all the traces of the passionate man were gone. It was like a switch had been flipped, and I had to blink my eyes to ensure I was seeing it right.

How could he turn off his feelings so quickly?

I brushed my slightly trembling hands down my dress nervously. I couldn't turn my feelings on and off like that. But it was good to see it firsthand and remain vigilant while keeping my head.

He put his hand on the small of my back and together we exited the elevator to a large room full of people mingling around, drinks in their hand. From all the corners of the room, eyes were on us, although some pretended not to look our way.

"What kind of party is this?" I asked, realizing too late I never asked the purpose of it.

Some people openly gawked, whispering to each other.

Don't worry about them, Bianca. When all was said and done, I'd never see them again. These strangers didn't matter, only my girls' safety. This man was offering some form of protection while I figured out how to get out of this mess.

Yes, I told myself. *He is using me, and I'm using him.*

Something deep inside of me warned, but I ignored it.

"We closed a large real estate deal in Italy." There was no boasting in his voice, no excitement or pride. It was just another acquisition for him. "On the Amalfi coast."

There was a strange look in his eyes as he indicated the location of the property.

"Nice," I told him, wondering if I was missing something. Maybe he needed a pat on the back. "Congratulations. It is my favorite part of Italy."

His eyebrow arched in surprise. "Really?"

"Yeah. I have some family there."

He continued watching me, and I started to wonder if I missed something.

"Bianca." I turned my head in the direction of the man's voice.

It was Gabito, Angie's boyfriend, with another woman on his arm. She was very pretty, her blonde locks softly cascading down her shoulders. She wore a bright red dress

that worked well with her complexion and fair hair. They both approached us with a wide smile on their faces. Stopping a foot from us, Gabito reached down kissing my cheek, causing me to stiffen. It wasn't a greeting I was accustomed to from strangers.

"Nice to see you again," he greeted me. "This is my wife."

I stared in shock at his wife that he just introduced. He was married! Did Angie know?

She reached out her hand with a friendly but chilled smile.

"Hi there, I'm Jenna Palermo," her voice was melodious, but her eyes were on Nico, devouring him. *Palermo*, why did that last name sound so familiar?

Palermo, Palermo. I searched my memory but came up empty. I was certain I heard that name before.

"And you are?" she turned her attention to me with a fake smile.

Instinctively, I knew she didn't like seeing another woman with Nico. Ridiculous jealousy spread through me, but I quickly squashed it. It was pointless to be jealous; Nico and I only had a marriage contract arrangement. Though the man's kisses were a delightful kind of sin.

I'll call it a perk of this arrangement, I mused to myself.

"Jenna, meet my fiancé," Nico answered. "Bianca."

Jenna's eyes widened, glancing between the two of us in confusion. She probably wondered what Nico Morrelli saw in someone like me.

A criminal, I thought wryly. I could only imagine the reactions if they knew how this came about.

"How long have you two known each other?" Jenna asked, her cold, blue eyes glancing at Nico's hand on my waist then back to him. She was practically swooning over him. I didn't have to look at Nico to know he noticed it. That man noticed everything.

I felt his arm tighten around me, pulling me closer and for some stupid reason, it warmed my chest. Yes, so dumb.

“For a while,” Nico answered her.

Jenna playfully touched his bicep, and I knew it was just so she could put her hands on him. It made me want to smack her hand and hiss *Mine*. Envy and hate flashed in her eyes. Jealousy wasn’t a good look on her, but it wasn’t on me either.

“You devil. I thought just three months ago, you were involved with that model. What was her name?”

Nico didn’t bother answering, so she continued in a sweet tone, watching me with poison in her eyes. “He kept you a secret,” she drawled with a fake smile on her face. “I wonder why?”

“Maybe because I kept him a secret too,” I retorted dryly, annoyed that she was trying to make me jealous and even more that it was working. “We like keeping our relationship exciting like that,” I added sweetly.

Venom spit from her eyes, and I had to bite inside of my cheek not to grin.

Nico leaned over, his hot breath in my ear. “Is my woman jealous?”

Shivers ran down my spine, having him so close to me. I threw him a sideways glance, then rolled my eyes at him. My woman! The man was absolutely barbaric. Yet my insides melted at the claim and mentally I facepalmed myself.

Returning my attention to the weird couple, I noted Jenna watching my left hand with the engagement ring, envy clear on her face. If she only knew this all was a fake arrangement.

“Wow, that ring is beautiful,” she complimented. “Nico always knew how to make a woman feel special.”

“Hmmm.” I couldn’t comment on that since I barely knew the man. But thinking of him with another woman didn’t sit well with me.

It's only because he is a skillful kisser, I kept telling myself.

This whole situation was a bit fucked up. Jenna flirted with Nico and tried desperately to make me jealous. On the same token, her husband was seeing Angie. Maybe those two needed a major marriage do-over. I didn't believe in cheating. I knew firsthand how damaging it could be to a family.

William's infidelity left invisible scars that were still part of me. We made a conscious decision to work on our relationship and stay together. Yes, I loved him, but once the trust was broken, it was like putting pieces of shattered glass back together. It never fit quite the same.

The memory caused me to stiffen in Nico's arms. It was something I avoided thinking about. Some ghosts were better left undisturbed. His indiscretion happened in the early days of his diagnosis. He blamed it on the shock and realization he would die. At least that was what he told me.

"I love that we'll see you around more, Bianca," Gabito announced, a genuine smile on his face. I, on the other hand, hoped I wouldn't see him, nor his wife that gawked at Nico. "The wedding will be the event of the year. Have you set the date yet?"

My heart skipped a beat at the thought of the wedding. I tried not to think about it since it caused my anxiety to increase each time it crossed my mind.

"Yes, next week." Nico answered curtly, then promptly switched the subject to a work topic.

Gabito and his wife lingered, talking about a project that made no sense to me so I stopped paying attention. My thoughts traveled to that night when William came back home with lipstick on his collar.

“William, are you drunk?” The way he stumbled I was sure he had been drinking.

He grinned that boyish smile, which usually got him a free pass. “Just a tiny bit.”

“Tiny bit?” I retorted, annoyed. The twins had been sick, mixed with worry about my husband and lack of sleep made me exceedingly cranky. “You smell like a damn bar.”

He stumbled towards me, his step unsteady. “Don’t get all prissy on me.”

My eyebrows shot up. What. The. Fuck?

“I just had a few drinks.”

That was when I spotted it. Narrowing my eyes, I leaned closer to him. “Is that lipstick on your shirt?”

I pointed to his collar and he glanced down, like he could actually see something.

“Where?”

“On your collar?”

Lifting his head, I could see him searching for an answer, but he was too drunk to think fast.

“William?”

“I met up with a woman.” A gasp escaped me. “Before you jump to conclusions, it was for a side job. Something to make us extra money.”

“What does that have to do with lipstick on your shirt?”

“She is European or something,” he muttered. “She kissed me goodbye and must have left a smear there.”

“Who is she?” I questioned him, unsure whether I should believe him.

“Jenna Palermo.”

Palermo! That was where I heard that name before. Jenna Palermo connected William with the side job for the

Morrellis. I learned weeks later he actually did sleep with her.

My ears buzzed, the fury and adrenaline rush mixing in my veins. I wanted to reach across and slap that woman's face. Or at least scratch it. My anger burned bright with a dangerous need for revenge and to make her suffer. Something dark clawed at my chest, wanting to plunge a knife into hers, so she could feel the physical pain. Just as I had felt it in my heart when I learned about his infidelity.

Women like her just took, regardless of what the fallout could mean for others.

And now, she was here trying to wrap herself all around Nico. Not that I had any claim to that man. But it rubbed me the wrong way that she'd flirt with him in front of me, whether our arrangement was fake or not.

Nico finally cut the couple short.

"Bianca and I have to go."

His arm around me, he guided us away from them. Taking a deep breath, trying to control the anger within me, I exhaled slowly. Then took another deep breath. My temper has always been my downfall.

"What's wrong?" Nico's voice was low, so only I could hear him.

Now wasn't the time nor place to question him about Jenna, or why she got my husband a side job with him. I raised my eyes to him, searching his face. I wished I could get my answers just by looking at him. He was an enigma to me, as his eyes studied me.

He pulled me to the side, away from everyone. Once we were on the opposite side of the room, away from the crowd, he finally spoke.

"Talk to me," he ordered.

I took a strangled breath then exhaled slowly.

"Jenna and William were-" I couldn't even finish the sentence, the pain of betrayal still a wound that didn't heal. "She got him the boat job with you." I couldn't tell from his

expression whether he was surprised or not. “She and William had a thing. Are you and that woman-”

Surprise flashed in his eyes, but he quickly got himself together.

“No.” His answer was firm, short, no trace of deceit in his eyes and a sigh of relief left me. “Jenna Palermo and I never had any physical relationship. Why?”

I didn’t want to be part of any triangle. Mine and Nico’s marriage would be just a temporary arrangement, but I’d be faithful for as long as we were married. I loved my mother, she had sacrificed her life for me. So I could have better choices. It would be a disappointment if I got myself into a love triangle. I wouldn’t be able to look at myself in the mirror ever again. To me, being the other woman was a special kind of sinking low. I knew the knowledge that she was reduced to just being the other woman shattered my mother.

I smiled nervously. “I don’t want…” How do I explain to him I didn’t believe in cheating, hated lying and deceit because my biological father used my mother that way and she suffered! Horribly! “Angie told me she was dating Gabito. And then seeing him with his wife and she was… flirting with you. And then remembering the name and William’s confession that he slept with that woman.” Words poured from my lips, my heart racing with nervousness. “I don’t believe in cheating. It’s wrong.”

It probably made me sound stupid. So be it. He could wait until our divorce to carry on his affairs.

“I don’t have a mistress,” he said softly, his mouth close to my ear. “And I told you already, Bianca. I only intend to have you in my bed.”

Relief spread through my body, and without thinking, I wrapped my arms around him. He returned the hug, and it felt so good to be in his arms again. Protected. I craved his closeness. My long abstinence has made an idiot out of me.

“It’s stupid,” I murmured against his chest, “but if you want to cheat, wait until our marriage contract is over.”

If someone would have told me I’d be having this conversation with a man I was about to marry, I would have laughed. And a mob head at that.

“What about you and John Martin?” His question surprised me, and I lifted my eyes to meet his gaze.

“No,” I told him. “John is a friend. I couldn’t do this marriage contract if we were more than friends.”

“Good,” he said, a satisfied smile on his face. “Because I told you already, I don’t share. So, let’s keep it this way. We won’t be seeing other people outside each other while we are married.”

I must be losing my mind because I eagerly nodded my head in agreement. “Let the countdown begin,” I joked, although it wasn’t really funny.

For the rest of the party, we mingled and made small talk with other people. Unlike William who tended to disappear and leave me to my own devices at social gatherings, Nico was very attentive and introduced me to everyone as his fiancé. Every single person went out of their way to be extra nice, except for women. But I smiled and played my part.

It didn’t take long for Nico to get pulled away by his business. I couldn’t help but wonder whether it was his legitimate or illegitimate business. But it wasn’t really my business, and it was better that I didn’t know.

I was left surrounded by strangers and trophy wives, feeling slightly at a loss. It was barely ten in the morning but the women were dressed up as if they expected to go out for an evening. Hands down, I wore the simplest dress around here.

The conversation topics were unrelatable. Vacations in Nice, yachts docked in Venice and Ibiza, gambling at casinos in Monte Carlo. And there was little old me. I had

spent the past four years being a mother and wife. Nothing else.

Oh, and a recent thief, I reminded myself. After all, it was how I found myself in this predicament.

I excused myself from the circle of women and men, then headed out to the large balcony on the opposite side of the room.

The large French glass doors were wide open and fresh air flew through it. I couldn’t believe the empty balcony; it was the best spot on this floor. Instead, all the people crammed inside, as if they wanted to ensure they were seen.

Stepping out onto the large marble balcony, I took a deep breath and let the fresh air enter my lungs and the sounds of the busy street down below wash over me. The view in front of me was incredible. The National Mall stretched as far as the eye could see with the U.S. Capitol on the eastern end of it and the Washington Monument on the western side. I leaned over the balcony, hoping to get a glimpse of the Lincoln Memorial.

It was my dad’s favorite monument. He taught me everything and many of his lessons revolved around Lincoln's quotes.

Always remember, Bianca, I could hear his voice even now. *Whatever you are, be a good one. And destroy your enemies by making them your friends.*

He was absolutely right.

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Chapter Fifteen

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NICO

I stood in the conference room with Jack Callahan, head of the East Coast Irish mob, and his nephew as they finished the phone call with Cassio. The only barrier between us and the rest of the party was the wall of frosted glass that provided the privacy we needed. The meeting with Jack was to wrap up the arrangements on the debt he owed to Cassio. The debt would be paid in the form of a marriage, except Jack was unaware of the decoy.

He'll find out soon enough though, I thought wryly. And then shit was sure to hit the fan.

I couldn't keep my eyes from constantly searching out Bianca, to make sure she was alright. After that little piece of information Bianca told me, I sent a note to Leonardo to run a deep check on Jenna through Cassidy Tech and any resources we had. I needed all the details on Jenna Palermo's activities over the last two years. I used her to set the trap for William, to give him the side business. I took advantage of William's weakness for women, in particular blonde women. Jenna never questioned why I needed William to do a job for me, and she didn't know any details or reasoning behind it. But her job was never to sleep with him.

Albeit, I found it odd that she slept with William Carter. At least Bianca seemed to think she did. William wasn't the type Jenna usually went for - not unless she was working. That woman was a snake in the grass, always aiming for men with money and power and willing to do anything for it. The only reason she was married to Gabito was because that connection was arranged by their parents.

My eyes lingered on Bianca's form through the translucent glass doorway, in her simple day dress. She seemed like a leaf in the wind among this party, but not in a bad way. In fact, she stood out in the best way possible. She didn't try to fit in or to impress. It was as if she was in her own world and nobody else mattered to her.

I thought back to her asking me whether Jenna and I were a thing. I didn't expect Bianca's open aversion to cheating although I welcomed it. It was refreshing. In my world, cheating and affairs were an everyday occurrence. Hell, even my own parents had lovers on the side. Nobody even batted an eye at it. But it really bothered Bianca.

If you want to cheat, wait till our marriage contract is over.

Uncharacteristic possessiveness overwhelmed me at the thought of her moving on. There would be no expiration date to our marriage. I would let her believe it; for now. She was mine now and forever, and I was never the sharing type. Rather than dwell on the fact Bianca put an expiration date to our marriage, I relished in the knowledge she'd soon be mine.

She was different. I couldn't believe that a cruel motherfucker like Benito King could actually produce a daughter like her. She probably escaped unscathed because she was raised by another man and a maternal grandmother.

Knowing of William's infidelity, I wondered why she tended to her husband through his sickness. The background check showed her caring for him and visiting

him every single day at the hospital, spending every minute with him during the last months of his life. One picture from her file was especially engraved into my brain. It was a picture of her with her little daughters at her husband's gravesite. There were people all around her, but she looked so lost, so alone, so much sadness on her beautiful face.

She was a better person than I was. I wasn't the forgiving type. My parents would attest to it.

"I'll depend on you to coordinate the wedding," Cassio's voice came through the speakers. "Keep the knowledge of the arrangement between the two of us to a minimum. Only people that you trust. I don't need a war with my father to start just yet."

That was an understatement. Benito King would go on a damn murder rampage if he knew Cassio won over the Irish to his side.

"You can count on my wife," Jack Callahan announced. "She knows how to do it."

"Excellent," Cassio replied. "Nico will be our go-between for now, to ensure this remains under the radar."

Cassio's obsession with this marriage would end up driving him mad. He started planning and manipulating about six years ago. Though not much better could be said about me.

A few more details were exchanged, all the while I kept my eyes on Bianca. I noticed the moment she left the party. Her slim figure drifted through the crowd, attracting men's wistful gazes without her noticing it. She stepped out onto the balcony, the light breeze clinging the dress against her body. I wondered if she even realized she constantly sought solitude.

With the meeting finished, Jack and his nephew departed immediately. This party was to celebrate the closure of another property acquired, but it was also a way to disguise my meeting with the Irish.

The brief conversation about the Amalfi coastal property led me to believe Bianca might not know she owned a piece of property there. Or maybe she didn't realize the significance of it. She wasn't good at hiding her expressions, but there was no missing her complete disinterest. I suspected it was the location Benito King used to smuggle in his product - women from Africa and Asia. Did her mother know? It remained to be seen.

I strode through the crowded room, every so often someone would stop me to congratulate me on the business expansion. Except none of it mattered to me, but for the dark-haired beauty. I couldn't wait to have this woman in my bed. My only worry was that once I had her, it wouldn't be enough. With each touch of hers, I wanted more. Eventually, I would demand everything from her. Every heartbeat. Every breath.

She was my kryptonite, making me vulnerable because my cravings for her weakened me. I'd do anything to keep her with me.

Just as I neared the balcony, my phone beeped. I paused my step seeing it was from Leonardo and swiped the message.

Not good. Carter was Jenna's target, under BK.

BK wanted the man eliminated.

Fuck. That damn woman played both sides. I would have to move everything forward. I quickly typed a reply with instructions.

Get her on the way out. Take her to the basement.

Why would Benito care about William Carter and want him eliminated? The coincidence seemed suspicious. The timing of Jenna's seduction of William seemed too opportune.

I raised my head to find Bianca's small body leaning over the balcony, her eyes searching for something. Slowly, I approached her, admiring the view of her backside. She had a perfect figure for romping. I wanted to dominate her,

possess her, listen to her screams as she fell apart under me. The chemistry and magnetic pull between us was intense. I have experienced nothing like it in all my forty years.

I remained silent, not wanting to startle her and watched her as I imagined all the ways I would make her come soon.

I would take her bent over the balcony of my penthouse, in this same position. I couldn't wait to bury myself in her. I'd make her sore in the best way possible.

"Nico," her exclamation had me raising my eyes, trailing from her ass to her eyes. She turned her head over her shoulder, still in the same position, slightly leaned over her balcony and watched me with a raised eyebrow. "All done with your meeting?"

Ignoring her question, I asked instead, "What are you looking for?"

She turned towards me, a warm glint in her eyes as she watched me with the little smile around her lips.

"I was trying to get a glimpse of the Lincoln Memorial. It's too far though." She pushed her hands through her hair. "It was my dad's favorite monument. We spent so many weekends around it."

She talked about her dad with love and warmth. She certainly wasn't talking about Benito King. That bastard had no love for anyone but himself. She didn't know it, but she was lucky she didn't have to endure him while growing up. Or had no connections with him.

If he would have known about his daughter, she'd be in his clutches. But Benito wanted her for something, the question was what. Now, I regretted telling Jenna and Gabito about the wedding. The question was why was William Jenna's target under Benito?

Whatever it was, I'd find out. Neither Benito nor Jenna planned for me.

Bianca might have been born into the mobster world, but nobody but her mother knew it. It was one of the many glaring differences between Bianca and I. She spoke about her family, even her cheater husband with warmth and love.

I couldn’t force a single warm word out of my mouth for either of my parents. The only thing my father respected was greed, money, power, and fear. And let’s not forget his ever-changing mistresses. It was the only reason my old man worshiped me, because I got more power and money than he could have ever imagined. He even overlooked the fact that I pushed him out of every business, legitimate and illegitimate. I would never forgive him for letting Benito King get away with what he had done to Nicoletta. The image of her violated body and dead eyes was seared into my mind.

Since my sister’s brutal death, my mother only respected her bottle and her pills. It was her reprieve, though a weak one. My father couldn’t even bother to remember my sister, while my mother couldn’t forget her. Although she tried to do so with drugs and younger men. While women’s infidelity wasn’t tolerated, my old man tolerated my mother’s. Because without her, he would lose access to all her Cassidy fortune. She didn’t inherit any of the businesses, but she didn’t need to because her financial wealth was substantial as the only daughter of my grandfather. And I was her only executor. My grandfather was a smart man making me the executor so my father couldn’t manipulate my mother into handing it over to him.

I watched this beauty in front of me, a breeze in her hair. She looked way too young to be a widow and a mother. Way too young and innocent to pay for her father’s sins. It wasn’t fair, but this fucking world wasn’t fair. By the time Benito realized Bianca was his daughter, it would be too late. She’d be in my world, my wife.

Did I use my power and money to get her, just like Benito did with my sister? Yes. Maybe I wasn't much different from him, but at least Bianca would stay alive. Unlike my sister who was mutilated. The only ones I worried about were Cassio and Luca King, unsure how those two would react once they learned they had a sister, and I forced her into marriage.

"How is the event going?" Her question broke the silence. "Everything ok?"

She nervously chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes anxious.

Why was she nervous?

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Chapter Sixteen

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BIANCA

The moment I mentioned my father, Nico's whole posture changed. I should have insisted on a detailed job description, instructions, or list of expectations to come with this marriage contract. Maybe he only cared about my body and didn't want to hear about my father or learn about my daughters. Though my gut feeling was telling me it was something else entirely that had Nico tensing.

"Everything ok?" I asked him hesitantly.

"Yes," he replied. "You and your father were close?"

"We were. He was the best," I admitted softly. "He was incredible. Taught me everything, from riding a bike to changing a tire to even shooting a gun." Nico raised his eyebrow in surprise and I chuckled. "He was a modern kind of father."

"I'll have to lock my guns up," he joked.

"Maybe you should," I teased back.

A gentleman came behind Nico, his eyes darting between Nico and me. He was older, but the silvery, white hair didn't make him seem any less dangerous than the man I was about to marry in a week. What have I gotten myself into?

“Nico,” he had a heavy Italian accent. “I came to say goodbye before I left.”

“Ambassador, thanks for coming.” Nico shook his hand and then reached out to me, pulling me closer. “I haven't had a chance to introduce you yet. This is Bianca, my fiancé.”

I had the urge to glance behind me, but I stopped myself. *Duh, that’s me*.

Reaching out my hand, I smiled. “Nice to meet you, Ambassador.” The older man’s eyes watched me carefully, and I wondered what he was looking for. “I’m guessing you are an Italian Ambassador?”

He nodded. Why wasn’t it surprising Nico had ambassadors in his pockets too? Probably all Italian and U.S. politicians too.

“That is a beautiful name,” he commented. “Italian?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “My grandmother threatened to kill my dad if he didn’t give me her mother’s name. He was scared, so he caved in.”

The ambassador’s laughter echoed on the small balcony. “I don’t blame him. Italian women can have quite a temper.”

I nodded in agreement. My grandmother had a temper, so did I. Somehow it slipped my mother’s genes. I couldn’t decide if that was good or not. It left her too vulnerable to Benito. But if she fought him, she would have probably been dead by now. But what kind of life did she really lead? I wished there was a way to get her out… somehow.

“Do you speak Italian?”

“I’m a bit rusty,” I told him. I regretted not practicing it, but life kind of got in the way. “After my grandmother passed away, I didn’t have a chance to practice it much. My dad wasn’t Italian, so he didn’t speak any.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” His words and smile were compassionate, but somehow didn’t reach his eyes. “You and Nico should come to our upcoming annual celebration

of US-Italian mutual relationships at the embassy. You would enjoy it and maybe even get to practice some Italian."

Smiling, I opted to let Nico answer that one. I had no idea whether that invitation should be accepted or not. It didn't seem like something a mobster would attend, but then I didn't expect to see an Ambassador here either.

"Thank you for the invitation. We would love to," Nico answered, surprising me.

"Wonderful." The ambassador truly looked pleased. "I'll send an invitation to Nico's office. My wife will be excited to meet you, Bianca. She is Italian too."

I chuckled. "I wouldn't exactly call myself Italian," I replied softly. "My grandmother accused me quite a few times of being too American. She even said sending me to Italy for the summer was a mistake because I turned my cousins into Americans."

Both Nico and the ambassador laughed.

"I can't wait to introduce you to my wife next Saturday then," he replied, his voice full of laughter.

Hmmm, won't next Saturday be the wedding day? I questioned silently. But maybe if Nico accepted this invite, it meant we could push it out. I decided it was better not to bring it up.

Nico and the Ambassador exchanged a few more words, and I marveled at this weird situation. I never would have imagined myself speaking to an ambassador, even less being invited to an event at the embassy. William and I mostly hung out with people we went to school and college with, people from the neighborhood, other families.

"See you soon, dear," the ambassador greeted me one more time as he left us.

"He seems nice," I muttered, not sure what else to say.

"He is usually a tough person to deal with," Nico claimed. "And the event he invited us to is actually a very important event covering Italian real estate along the coast

of Amalfi. It is a very small event and usually they limit it to only individuals with Italian background from that area."

It meant nothing to me. "Sounds exciting, huh?"

He chuckled, "You don't seem too impressed."

Shrugging my shoulders, I answered. "Not really."

"I presume your cousins live on the Amalfi coast?"

I chuckled. "Yes, though I haven't seen them in almost ten years." He raised his eyebrow, and I wondered what crossed his mind. "Is that a problem?" I asked him.

"No, just a curious coincidence," Nico's deep voice vibrated through me, his body close to mine. Though his words didn't make any sense. Coincidence to what? "It's past noon. Traffic out of D.C. can be bad. I'll take you home."

"Don't be silly," I objected. "It is ridiculous to drive me to Maryland and then come back."

"My place is in Maryland too." He wrapped his arm around me and guided me off the balcony. "You'll be on my way."

"What about Bear?" I still choked calling him that.

"The bodyguards will be right behind us."

"Why do you need bodyguards?" I questioned him as we walked through the room full of people.

He chuckled darkly. "I don't think you need the answer to that one, Bianca."

He was right. He probably had a long list of people that wanted him dead. Just as he had a long list of people he wanted to make pay. Why did I feel like I got stuck somewhere in the middle?

We finally got into the elevator and my cheeks warmed remembering the kiss on our way up the elevator. I lost all control, completely lost it. Just like at the restaurant yesterday. It scared the living daylights out of me. I didn't care to evaluate why his touch, his kiss had such a strong impact on me. As if he could read my thoughts, Nico's hand

on my hip pulled me closer to him, his heat seeping through my pores and into my bloodstream.

When we exited his building, Bear was already waiting for us. The Bentley he drove was parked behind another fancy car and two black Land Rovers, surrounding it. Whoever drove that car would be stuck till the Land Rovers left.

“Sir, we are ready,” Bear told Nico.

“Thanks,” Nico replied. “Tell the men we are ready to go.”

Bear spoke into his wrist while I watched in amazement as five other men in dark suits appeared out of nowhere. It was like a scene from a real mob movie.

What in the hell did I get myself into?

Nico opened the door to the fancy car for me. “This is yours?”

“Yes.”

“We won’t be able to get out,” I told him, tilting my chin towards the vehicles surrounding him. Practically the entire right lane was blocked by vehicles, surrounding his car.

“They are my men.”

“Oh.”

I slid into the vehicle and reached for the seatbelt as Nico went around to the driver’s side. I tracked his every move, studying him. He moved gracefully and confidently. It didn’t surprise me, but he fascinated me despite everything.

He got behind the wheel and roared the car to life.

“What kind of car is this?” I asked him, breaking the silence.

“Aston Martin Vantage.”

“Seriously?” Jesus, this was my dad’s dream car. And Grandpa Carter’s.

“I wouldn’t joke about it.”

My eyes skimmed over the luxury car. “Gosh, my dad would have gone nuts,” I mumbled. “He loved cars but the Aston Martin was his dream. William’s dad too.”

Thinking about Dad always made me sad. I missed him; the simple talks and things we did together. He was truly the best father a girl could wish for and learning he wasn’t my biological dad when he passed away made him even a bigger hero in my book.

“He liked cars?” Nico asked never taking his eyes off the road, driving smoothly through the city.

“He liked a lot of things,” I smiled wistfully. “Cars, boats, hiking, fishing. Though tinkering with cars was his favorite.”

“Sounds like a great guy.”

“The best,” I murmured, glancing out the window. Dad and Grandma were my entire world growing up. They more than made up for the absence of Mom. I just wished my mother didn’t have to give up so much. Though maybe, I could somehow use this marriage with Nico Morrelli to help her.

One thing I learned in my life was that hope was a bitch. But it was what kept us going. At least that was what my dad always said.

God, I missed him. I missed our hiking trips through the mountains; I missed our time at the gun range, sitting in the garage chatting about our dreams and big plans, the smell of the rain drifting through the open garage door. There was something so comforting about the sound of the raindrops against the pavement and the fresh cool breeze sweeping through the big bay while I handed him tools and watched the gray skies.

Nico’s eyes reminded me of those gray skies.

Never lose hope, Sunshine. Dad’s voice was clear as day.

It has been lonely since he passed away. I loved William, but I never told him what I discovered. To this day, I wasn’t

sure why. Then I found out about his infidelity, and I pulled away even further.

Maybe our little glass house shattered even before he got really sick and he took money from Nico Morrelli.

“What about you?” I asked him, glancing his way. “How long have you been… ummm, a mobster?”

He chuckled, actually chuckled. “For a long time.”

“There is a school for mobsters?” I teased.

“Well, if you think Harvard Business is a school for mobsters.”

“Wow.” I couldn’t help but be impressed. I knew he was smart, you’d have to be in order to be the big crime boss. “How old were you when you took over your… umm, business?”

“That’s putting it eloquently,” he commented. “I took over Cassidy business at twenty-one and the Morrelli business at twenty.”

Holy shit! When I turned twenty, my only goal was surviving college and the next party I’d attend. “Well, you are kind of putting me to shame. I barely finished college. I changed my major three times and none of them were that exciting.”

He raised his eyebrow. “Maybe you just didn’t find the right major.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. I think I just enjoyed messing around the kitchen and doing stuff with my dad. If I had siblings, I’d probably be the aunt that always feeds everyone.”

The words slipped without a thought. “You wanted siblings?” His question caught me unaware.

“Yes,” I admitted, gazing out the window. “I always loved the idea of a big family. You?”

The temperature in the car chilled a few degrees, and I risked a look his way. His expression darkened, sending an unsettling feeling up my spine.

“Yes.” His voice was frigid, and I didn’t dare to question whether he was saying he wanted siblings or he had siblings. Or was he saying he loved the idea of a big family.

The rest of the drive, we spent in silence.

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Chapter Seventeen

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NICO

At the mention of her dad, sadness enveloped Bianca. Then we started talking about families and the reminder of Nicolette felt like a stab in my heart. I missed her. We might not have talked every day, but just the knowledge that she was on this earth was a comfort. The knowledge that she could call me or text me anytime and vice versa grounded me.

I should explain to her that I had a sister that was brutally murdered. I glanced her way, but she seemed deep in her thoughts, and I decided to wait. There were plenty of days for the gloomy history.

Instead, I found myself wondering what she was thinking. I have been in her life for two days and somehow, she has become my ultimate wet dream. And very important to me.

Tasting her on my tongue yesterday, I knew I'd fuck her often. And in the elevator. Fuck, I was half tempted to stop it midair and fuck her right there. Her long, dark, silky hair and her soft, curvy body were my weakness. I could wrap her silky strands around my first and hold her by it as I fucked her mouth. Among many other things.

Jesus Christ! Her body and the way she responded to me would fucking ruin me. Before I even got her where I

wanted her. The soft, innocent expression in her dark eyes seemed to burn through my soul and straight down to my cock.

A woman shouldn't have this kind of impact on me. It didn't bode well in our world to desire something so much. Despite being Benito King's daughter, she was so much better than him. Cassio and Luca would become protective of her and her daughters. If I was honest, I could reveal her existence to them, and they'd keep her and her daughters safe.

Yet, I refused.

For the promise I made over Nicoletta's grave. And for my own selfish reasons. I wanted Bianca's everything, starting with her submission and body. And I was stuck somewhere between agitated and pleased with that revelation. After all, she'd be my wife, so it was good I found her excessively attractive.

We pulled up in front of her house and immediately my attention went to a strange vehicle in the driveway. It wasn't the same one from yesterday that the grandparents were driving. Unbuttoning my suit jacket, I ensured I had easy access to my gun holster. Bianca glanced around, her eyebrows scrunching.

"Hmmm, they are early," she muttered to herself. I wondered if she forgot I was in the car. The woman could be dangerously lost in her own head. It kind of reminded me of Nicoletta. She was a dreamer too.

"Who is?" I questioned her, my eyes on alert for any potential threat.

The front door of her house was wide open; that shouldn't be. I would leave men to keep an eye on her house when nobody was home too. I couldn't leave anything to chance here.

Bianca threw me a side glance then returned attention to her home she seemed to love so much.

"My kids and in-laws."

Pulling up, she didn’t bother waiting for me to open the door. She rushed out of the car, and no sooner was she out of my Aston Martin, two little girls came running. I knew she had twins: I saw them yesterday as they ran out of the house, their mother chasing them with shoes. But seeing them up close, something in my chest twitched. They were identical twins, and they didn’t resemble Bianca at all.

Bianca ran up the lawn, and both girls ran straight towards their mother, throwing themselves into Bianca’s wide open arms. A fit of giggles sounded through the air and Bianca kept showering their faces with kisses.

“Stop,” one of them giggled, her little hands on Bianca’s face as if to push her away but was holding on to her mother.

“I can’t help it,” Bianca’s voice carried through the breeze. “I missed you two.”

An older woman came through the door and Bianca greeted her with a wide smile. “Hey, G-mom.” She beamed.

“They couldn’t wait to get home,” the older woman explained. I knew from the background check it was William Carter’s mother.

All four laughed happily and carefree, forgetting all about the world around them. Bear and Leonardo were both beside me, while the other men went to do a parameter check.

“That woman is different,” Leonardo muttered. I knew what he meant. He knew she was Benito’s daughter, yet she couldn’t be more different. I wanted to preserve it, best I could. Yet, I knew there was a good chance that I’d ruin her too.

Security would become an everyday necessity in Bianca’s life. Things were moving quickly, especially with the latest discovery of Jenna’s betrayal. As soon as I was done here, I intended to go back to where she was being held and question her.

Watching Bianca like this, I realized this was the real her. The reserved woman, cautious with her smiles was gone, and in her place was the woman who loved her family with all her heart.

There were two little Barbie bikes laid in the middle of the driveway. A toy stroller with an overly large bear sat by the garage. On the other side of the property, there was a small beach, and I could tell they spent a lot of time there. A bucket of beach toys sat in the middle of the beach, right next to a mound of sand that resembled a sandcastle. On the lawn by the beach, there were two large wooden chairs and two small wooden chairs situated around the firepit. Not too far from it was a wooden swing with a pillow and throw blanket still sitting there. It was a warm and loving home.

The house sat on the corner of Gibson Island, on roughly two acres. It was a prime spot, with a beautiful house and a magnificent view, while the breeze swept off the bay. The estate wasn't large nor was the house particularly capturing. I'd seen and owned palaces, castles, and penthouses on top of the world.

This place though… Bianca's place screamed home.

Something I have always wanted. Something I promised Nicoletta and failed. Now, it was very probable I would ruin Bianca's idea of a warm home. And her girls'.

I am an idiot.

It was the only plausible conclusion. With an irritating sense of acquiescence, I watched the little family in front of me. After Nicoletta's death and discovering Bianca's connection to Benito, I started planning my revenge. However, for the first time, I questioned what I was about to do.

Frustration clawed at my chest, warning me this couldn't end well. Because my need for revenge blurred with my need for this woman. Instinctively, I knew Bianca

would only ever give me her body. She didn't need to say it, but I sensed it in every word and every touch we shared.

It wasn't enough. For the briefest second, I contemplated ending the revenge plot. And if that didn't make me the worst kind of traitor to my sister's memory, I didn't know what was.

Fuck, I needed to get this woman under me, fuck her hard, and this pull I felt towards her would diminish. Maybe we could have a few weeks, few months tops, of intense fucking, and I'd get my fascination with her under control. I had to.

She'd be my wife, give me heirs, but this obsession with her had to go. It wouldn't bode well to care too much for her. It would cloud my judgment and make me weak. In order to protect her and her family against Benito, I had to think with my brain, not my dick.

Mary Carter's eyes sought me out first. She frowned, and to say she wasn't happy to see a man here was understatement. *Too fucking bad!*

Next Bianca's little girls' curious gazes searched me out. Unlike their mother's soft brown eyes, the twins had deep blue eyes. They didn't resemble their father's eye color. There were very few pictures of Bianca's mother since Benito kept her under a tight circle, but from those few pictures I've seen, I'd wager they had their grandmother's eyes.

The twins left their mother and found their way over to me.

"Hi, I'm Hannah," one said with a big smile, her little fingers pulling on my pants suit. "Who are you?"

"I'm Arianna," the other chimed in, pulling on my other leg. Their faces were smeared with something sticky, and I couldn't help but smile.

I kneeled down to their eye level.

"I'm Nico," I introduced myself and reached out my hand. "Nice to meet you." They each took turns shaking it

with a wide grin on their small faces. “You two ladies have beautiful names.”

“I know,” Hannah announced, rolling her eyes like her mother. “Mom says she picked it.” She leaned closer and whispered. “She says Dad wanted to name us Number One and Two.”

I chuckled. “In that case, I think your mom picked perfect names.”

“I am so sorry,” Bianca found her way over to us. “Their hands and faces are a mess. Girls, let him go.”

“We are not a mess,” one of them objected, putting her little hands on her hips. I grinned. It was Hannah, and she had a little temper. She’d give us a run for our money when her teenage years came. “I washed my hands… twice.”

Bianca gently brushed her hand over her daughter's face. “But you forgot your face, lovebug.”

“My face is not dirty,” Hannah protested. “It’s beautiful.”

Bianca chuckled. “It sure is, but it is also sticky. Did Grandma give you a lollipop?”

Both of their expressions turned guilty as they shook their heads in a negative response.

“Yes, they both had one lollipop each,” Mary joined us.

“It’s not our fault Grandma gave us candy,” Arianna jumped in, then promptly turned her attention to me. These girls would be little troublemakers. “Want to go to the beach? Mommy will forget about candy later.”

I chuckled at her logic. Yes, definitely trouble.

“I would love to, but let’s save it for next time. I’ll make your mom forget about the candy,” I replied with a playful smile. “Deal?”

They both nodded eagerly, jumping around us. I raised back up to my full height, watching both women.

“Um, Nico,” Bianca shifted nervously on her feet, glancing between Mary and I. “This is Mary, my mother-in-law.” I turned to Mary who was watching me with pensive

eyes. “Mary, this is my…ummmm-” She cleared her through then tried again, “… my… ummm…”

Poor Bianca, she was really struggling. She cleared her throat uncomfortably, several times, but she just couldn’t seem to continue. Deciding I’d help her out and ensure she didn’t think about bailing out at the last minute, I extended my hand to Mary.

“I’m Bianca’s fiancé.” Mary’s shocked expression darted between Bianca and me. She probably didn’t even realize she took my hand in a handshake. It was an auto response. “Nice to meet you, Mary.”

Bianca gave me a little glare but to her credit remained quiet.

“W-what?” Mary stuttered. “How?”

“It happened fast,” Bianca quickly justified herself.

Mary tried to get herself together but failed, her throat moving but no words coming out.

“Mommy, is Grandma sad?” Arianna asked, her brows furrowed.

Bianca kneeled down and spoke softly to her daughters. “Girls, go get the toys off the beach, so they don’t wash away.”

The girls glanced between the three adults, clearly sensing something was happening but not understanding what.

Bianca gently nudged them. “Go ahead. I’ll come up and help you too.”

Both of them nodded and took off without a backward glance.

The moment they were out of earshot, Mary turned her eyes to Bianca. “You are getting married?”

Bianca flinched at the accusation in Mary’s voice.

“Bianca has been a widow for over a year,” I stood at my full height, wrapping my arm around her waist. “You can’t fault her for moving on.”

Tension seeped out of Bianca, her eyes locked on Mary.

“How long have you been dating?” Mary questioned her daughter-in-law. “Marriage is not something to be decided in a rush, for either one of you.” Agitation rose within me at her insolence. It wasn’t for her to preach to Bianca and certainly not me. “And what is your last name?”

“It is Nico Morrelli,” I told her in a cold voice. “And you will speak to Bianca with respect. She knows what’s best for her and her girls.”

Mary’s eyes got big. She knew my reputation. Good! If it put her in her place and stopped her from speaking to Bianca like that, my last name was well worth it.

Thick silence lingered, and I had no intention of breaking it. Mary Carter would not get in my way. Her son abandoned Bianca even before his death. She had no right to demand Bianca to remain faithful to her son’s memory.

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Chapter Eighteen

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BIANCA

The situation was uncomfortable, and that was putting it mildly. Mary had known me since I was a kid. I knew she'd be upset, but I didn't expect her to sound accusing. It hurt a bit, but I shoved it deep down. There was no possible way I could tell her why the marriage was happening, though it was on the tip of my tongue to start justifying myself. Even with lies, and I was horrible at lying.

But I stopped myself. I watched my mother-in-law carefully, her eyes glistening with tears and an enormous feeling of guilt hit me. The three of us stood there, the silence after Nico's words thick, choking the air around us.

"Nico, can I have two minutes alone please?" I asked him and he nodded.

"Of course, take your time." Surprisingly, his voice sounded soft, but his eyes watched Mary with a guarded, slight warning in his gaze. As stupid as it was, it made me feel somehow protected.

I nodded and turned to Mary who was still watching Nico. "Mary?"

I couldn't imagine what she was thinking or feeling right now. A mother should never bury her child. I had my own range of guilty feelings about doing this with Nico. For

Mary, it was seeing a man in front of her where her son should stand.

I took her hand gently into mine, and we slowly started walking away from Nico.

“Is everything ok, Mary?” I tried to keep my voice low, we were still in the middle of my yard, not far enough from Nico.

She stopped suddenly and turned towards me. My heart hurt and raced with fear. Would she lash out? Would she accuse me of forgetting about William? Not loving him enough?

“I knew the day would eventually come,” her voice trembled in the breeze. “But Nico Morrelli, Bianca! Do you know who he is?”

This was the part that I struggled with from the moment I was blackmailed into this arrangement. Do I feign ignorance or do I tell her I didn’t care Nico was a criminal?

Inhaling deeply, I nodded. “Yes, I know who he is. And I am doing this.”

At least until I had some cash stacked up. Then I’d have to pack up the girls and run.

“You shouldn’t do it,” she muttered, glancing Nico’s way. “The twins shouldn’t be around men like that.”

Valid point but that was decided the second William brought the bag full of money.

“Mary, please trust me,” I begged.

“You like him?” she questioned and I swallowed hard. The images of Nico eating me out at the restaurant or kissing in the elevator earlier today flashed through my mind. I guess we could say I liked him well enough.

I couldn’t get the words out so I just nodded.

“I couldn’t expect you to be single for the rest of your life.” Mary took a deep breath, as if trying to get her composure back. It was hard seeing this strong woman so shaken up. She glanced behind me, and I followed her gaze watching Nico. He watched us too. “Just promise me, the

girls will always remember William and be part of my life. I want them to know their grandparents and we, William and I, couldn't bear losing them too."

My throat choked with emotions. I hated seeing her upset, knowing her son was her whole world. I wrapped my arms around her, hugging her tight.

The day William and I told her we were having twins she cried from happiness. Ever since that day, she had been part of their lives. If I could help it, she would always be a part of their lives, but there were certain things I still had to resolve.

"Always, we'll always be part of your life and you a part of ours. No matter what." It felt like someone was fisting my throat, it hurt to talk. "I'll never let them forget William. Nothing could change who their father is."

It was the truth. No matter William's faults or mine, the twins would know who their parents were. My mother made a choice to keep me out of Benito's clutches at her own expense. Maybe she was braver, but I couldn't do it. I wanted it all - my girls at my side, safety, to see them grow up. A loving husband would be a nice bonus, but it wouldn't seem like it was in my cards.

"Thank you, Bianca." She hugged me tight, and I returned the embrace.

She pushed slightly, getting her composure back. "When is the wedding?"

Inwardly I groaned. I wasn't sure how much she could take. "In a week." Her face crumpled. "We'll still be in the area," I quickly assured her. "Might as well, right? It wouldn't be any better if the wedding lingered for months over your head. Or mine for that matter."

"I guess I can't blame you for wanting to tap that muscle," she mumbled, her eyes on Nico and the tension evaporated. I threw my head back and laughed out loud. Hearing the butchered term from her lips sounded all kinds of wrong. I couldn't contradict her. It certainly wasn't the

reason the wedding was happening that fast, but I'd be a liar if I said I didn't want to experience more of what happened. This man was making a horny woman out of me.

We both glanced at Nico who was casually leaning against his Aston Martin, patiently waiting. The way he watched us told me he might have heard our whole conversation.

"And who are all the other men?" Mary's voice had me returning my attention to her.

"His bodyguards," I muttered.

Her lips thinned, but she said nothing else.

"Do you want to stay for an early dinner?" I asked her, hoping to change the subject. "I was going to fix scialatielli ai frutti di mare. It's your favorite pasta dish."

Mary nodded her agreement, and I glanced at Nico. He approached us, his hands casually in his suit pockets. This man that ruled Maryland and the D.C. underworld would turn me to dust if I wasn't careful. Less than forty-eight hours and he had turned my world upside down. If I was smart, I would have fled right after running into him a month ago, but it was too late now.

"Hey Nico," Hannah yelled out and all three of us turned to the girls. Both girls were a mess already, shoeless and sand covering their feet. Both ran up to us, their clothes wet and their eyes locked on Nico with wide grins.

They looked so much like my mom and William with those bleach blonde curls framing their faces with big blue eyes. Sometimes I'd even think they look mostly like my mom more than anyone else. It was a reminder of her sacrifice and loss. But the girls mostly had my personality, though Arianna was more on the tamer side.

"Want to play hopscotch?" Arianna asked. "Hannah always wins. I wanna beat you."

A choked laugh escaped me. I couldn't picture Nico playing hopscotch, though it might be worth paying money to see. Luckily for everyone, I had no money.

I raised my eyebrow, waiting to see what he'd say. Nico's attention was on the girls, a wide smile on his face.

"Sure, girls. But I have to warn you, I am *really* good at hopscotch."

I couldn't hold back a full blown laughter. "Can I record you? Because that will be priceless, I just know it."

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Chapter Nineteen

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NICO

I might wear expensive, tailored suits, but I never hesitated to torture and murder people that betrayed me. Regardless if they were a man or a woman. After a game of hopscotch and early dinner with Bianca and her girls, I headed to the location where Jenna was being kept.

Jenna's head turned as I entered the basement. She had been the first woman to visit our little torture location. She shouldn't feel proud.

She hung there, her wrist tied above her head, hanging off the ceiling and her feet barely touching the ground. A special kind of torture, though I would have preferred to hang her by her scalp.

Fucking traitorous bitch.

Her eyes stared at me, like a deer caught in the headlights.

Slowly, deliberately, I took out my gun and released the safety. I placed it on the little table in the corner then turned back to her. Next, I pulled out my knife as I leisurely walked over to her.

Jenna's eyes darted to my knife and the color drained from her face. She was smart enough to know how this would play out. The end result would be death - it was up to

her whether it would be an easy road to her last breath or a long and painful one.

“You have two options,” I started, my voice void of all emotions. “The easy way out or the hard way.”

Her face was smeared from tears. I heard she begged my men for mercy. She’d never get it. She didn’t look so good anymore. Traces of her makeup smeared all over her face, ugly red blotches from tears all over it.

“Nico pleas-”

“I want to know everything,” I told her. “Start from the beginning.”

She shook her head. “I-I don’t know anything,” she said, trembling, her eyes full of lies. Her body swayed back and forth.

“We can do this all night,” I told her. “And for many more days to come.” I leaned closer, wrinkling my nose. “But know this, Jenna Palermo,” I hissed a breath, “I will get it out of you. Or Gabito!”

“Gabito is a coward.” Her teeth started to chatter, her eyes frantically looking to Leonardo behind me, pleading for help. “P-please, I didn’t-” she cried, “… I didn’t do anything…”

I raised my eyebrow. This woman was a piece of work. It was Jenna who was the coward here.

I couldn’t help but think back to Bianca, and how she owned up to her husband stealing the money. Her only plea was to kill her somewhere else so her daughters wouldn’t find her there.

Flipping the knife open, I pressed it against her cheek and ran it down to her neck. “I was hoping we could just end it quickly, with a bullet through your brain,” I said. “But I don’t mind making it messy either. Sometimes it’s rewarding.”

I pressed the blade against the flesh of her neck, and her scream pierced through the air. I barely cut her, but she was a coward. I watched as the small drop of blood ran

a trail down her neck and beneath the color of her crisp pink polo.

“You know,” I taunted, “you shouldn’t play with the big boys if you can’t take the punishment when caught.” I drew the knife lower, placing it against the flesh of her thigh, drawing it upwards beneath the short, white tennis skirt. I kept the blade from cutting her flesh, knowing it wouldn’t take much more before she cracked.

“I-I didn’t have a choice,” she screeched. “I didn’t.”

I lowered my knife and waited. “Well, do tell, Jenna. Tell me what forced you to sleep with Bianca’s husband and work for Benito.” She was stupid to think I didn’t already know. I was the Wolf. When it came to information, I could track down what I needed with little effort. The only downfall was having the right questions to ask. Otherwise, I would wind up going in a circle, chasing my own tail.

A gasp left her lips. “B-Benito?”

I grinned, and I imagined it wasn’t a pretty grin because I was pissed off as all hell.

“Are you denying it?”

“You have to let me go,” she begged, trying to jerk on her chains but only succeeding in dislocating her shoulder.

I pushed my knife against her shoulder blade, piercing through her skin through the polo and pushing into her muscle. I felt no regret or pity for her. She went after Bianca’s husband and caused Bianca pain. I wanted to know why.

“Why did Benito want you to seduce William Carter?” I asked. “And let me tell you, I fucking hate repeating myself.”

Leonardo stepped forward, holding his own gun. “We know you are working for him. Tell Nico everything, and he’ll end it quickly. Or I’ll make sure you last days before you’re given any type of relief from the amount of pain I will inflict on you.”

She sobbed, her hair a moppy mess. If she hoped for pity, she'd get none here.

"Last chance," Leonardo announced, grabbing a big saw. "We can start with sawing your toes."

Her head jerked back and forth. "He wanted me to kill him," she screeched.

Leonardo and I shared a glance. "Continue," I ordered.

"He wanted him dead," she cried, but her tears didn't faze me at all. "So he could get his hands on William's wife."

Anger burned like fire in the pit of my stomach.

"Why?"

"Something about property on the Amalfi Coast." Her voice was shaking, her eyes frantic. "He wanted it." Her gaze shifted back to me. "Please, Nico. I'll do anything-"

This bitch thought she knew me. All she saw was my suits and money. But underneath it all was my depravity and hunger for the kill. She could never comprehend the ruthless nature of criminals, thinking she could manipulate us.

"How were you going to kill him?" I asked, ignoring her pleas. A storm brewed inside me, ready to snap Jenna's neck for her betrayal.

"We did kill him," she confessed. "I've met William even before you approached me. Benito wanted him dead. I seduced him the first night, then slipped Thallium into his drink." Fuck! Thallium wouldn't have been found in his bloodstream. Not unless the doctors were looking for it." It's colorless, odorless, tasteless poison. We arranged for the doctors on Benito's payroll to see William through his treatments. He didn't have a brain tumor. It was a false diagnosis." She wept like she was the one suffering; when in fact, she was the one that caused suffering. "The doctors pumped him full of poison, to speed up the death."

The blood in my veins froze. That fucking bastard! "Where did you get the poison?" I gritted my teeth.

“From Benito,” she whimpered, sensing my fury.

Thallium caused convulsions and it was a symptom that was common to a brain tumor diagnosis.

“Why hasn’t he made a move since her husband’s death?”

When she didn’t answer, I pushed my knife against her cheek, cutting through the flesh. The skin split, causing blood to gush down her face. I wanted to put salt in her cut so she could scream in suffering for being such a cold hearted bitch.

“Why?” I gritted out, pushing my knife further, the blade connecting with her cheekbone.

“Her mother has a property on the Amalfi Coast,” she screamed in agony. “It will eventually go to Bianca. Benito arranged to have Bianca sold. He contemplated having her lined up to be his mistress, or Marco’s, like her mother. But then he made a different deal. He won’t let you marry her. He’s coming for her.”

Obviously, he didn’t know Bianca was his daughter. My stomach churned at the revelation. I reached for the gun on the table before pointing it at Jenna’s head and pulling the trigger. Her body jerked before her head fell forward and her body slouched against the restraints still holding her up.

It was better than she deserved.

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Chapter Twenty

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BIANCA

By the time I crawled into bed, it was nearly ten at night. The girls had their bath and crashed from exhaustion. The best tuck in ever. The evening was surprisingly pleasant, though I couldn't shake off a feeling that something was about to happen. Probably stupid wedding jitters. I mean who wouldn't have them if they were marrying a mobster.

Nico left shortly after Mary, right after our early dinner. By six o'clock, it was just the girls and me. It almost felt like our normal day, except that Bear was around and a few other men were surrounding the house. When I questioned Nico about it, he said it was a standard procedure. Whatever the heck that meant!

Once everyone was gone, the girls and I went to the beach for a bit longer. We all splashed, laughed, and played. Then we came back for cookies and shared a batch with the men, while sitting on the patio. Bear was the only one to ever come inside the house. Strangely enough, once I told my girls the men were watching the house, they were satisfied with that explanation and adopted them into our routine.

Staring at the ceiling in the dark, I went through the events that happened over the last two days in my head.

Mary wasn’t happy about the quick wedding. She questioned Nico about the reasoning behind the urgency, hinting that maybe I was pregnant. It annoyed me a bit, but I ignored it. However, something about the way Nico answered her when questioned about the wedding bothered me. When she asked for the location of the ceremony, he said he hadn’t decided yet. Same with time, size… he avoided telling her any details. Not that I myself knew of any of it.

It had been a whirlwind since he showed up in my kitchen threatening to kill me or marry me. My phone beeped and surprisingly a message from Angie flashed on my screen.

Just heard you are getting married in a week. Holy shit! Text me.

I groaned at that. It didn’t take a genius to figure out who told her. I typed the reply back.

It happened suddenly. I met Gabito’s wife today. WTF???

I wouldn’t tell her that his wife had a thing with William. It would give her ammunition to remain with Gabito. Although, I had a feeling she would anyway. A reply came instantly.

Long story. Those two can’t stand each other.

It worried me where it left Angie though. Yes, my friend was a bit misguided but she had a good heart. I didn’t think Jenna had a good heart. I might be biased but she struck me as a manipulator.

Make sure you don’t get hurt. You deserve much better. John still talks about you. Good night.

Let her think about that. John would never cheat on her or drag her into a triangle.

Setting the phone back on the nightstand, I laid back against my pillows with a heavy sigh. My mind raced and went in a million different directions. I wondered what William would think of this whole thing. Nico was such the

opposite of William, in every aspect, that I wondered how I could be attracted to him.

William and I had been an item since high school, we were everything to each other. He was gentle, thoughtful, funny, and so lighthearted. Until those last two years. Then it was as if I couldn't recognize him. His illness must have impacted his behavior. There was no other explanation for it.

I stared into the darkness, images of William's frail face on the hospital bed flashing in my mind. Tears pricked my eyes as I remembered him watching me, his concern only for me while he was on his deathbed. His body was so battered by all the chemicals and treatments, but he still worried about me. Those last few weeks was when I finally felt the old William was back. I couldn't explain it, but that selfless man was who he used to be before everything went downhill.

"I miss you, William," I whispered into the darkness, closing my eyes.

I TOSSED AND TURNED ALL NIGHT. THE IMAGES OF WILLIAM plagued my dreams along with the upcoming wedding to Nico turning into a blood stained disaster.

The daylight came too soon. I could feel the sun rays on my eyelids, coming through the window. Groaning, I turned away from the lights and pulled the covers over my head, burying my head into the pillow.

A soft chuckle reached my ears, and I smiled dreamily. William always found it amusing when I refused to get up in the morning. I'd tell him I was trying to make up for all the sleep loss during the first two years of the twins' life.

William is dead!

I shot up into a sitting position, my eyes darting across the room. A man in a pristine dark suit sat in my room. *Nico?*

"What are you doing here?" I blurted out with confusion, my voice raspy from sleep. All my thoughts disoriented; I tried to distinguish whether I was still dreaming. Or was Nico Morrelli in my bedroom a reality?

I rubbed my eyes, then blinked, trying hard to clear my thoughts. I kept staring at the figure sitting in my favorite chair by the window.

Crisp, dark suit. Dark hair. Stormy gray eyes.

*Nico Morrelli **is** in my bedroom!*

Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, I noted it was only six in the morning.

"What are you doing here?" I repeated, slight panic creeping up my spine. The girls were in the room next door. It would alarm them if they saw him in the house. We haven't had an in-depth discussion with them about the wedding.

I pulled the covers higher, hiding as much of my body as I could.

He stood up, the epitome of calmness and grace, like it was completely normal he was in my bedroom on a Sunday morning. He fixed his cufflinks, which were perfect already as he spoke up.

Is he wearing a tuxedo? I pondered over his suit. It wasn't a standard tuxedo but then nothing this man had was standard.

"We are moving up the wedding date," he replied, his expression unreadable.

I frowned. I must have missed the point he was trying to make, because it was hardly a reason to show up at the crack of dawn and sit in my bedroom while I slept.

"Okay," I muttered, pushing my hand through my hair. I couldn't even imagine what a mess I looked like. "Another

few weeks or months won't really matter. You could have just called and told me that."

He chuckled again, like I just told the funniest joke.

"No, Cara Mia," he retorted, a gleam in his eyes. "We are moving up the wedding date, not postponing. We are getting married today."

Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

"W-what?"

"We are getting married today," he repeated, and it finally sunk into my brain. My eyes just about bulged out of my skull. Was he fucking crazy? Getting married in a week was a ridiculous plan, but today was outright crazy! "Listen, buddy. It is too early for jokes. If you are one of those men with a sick sense of humor first thing in the morning, we can't get married. Two years would be damn torturous to be married to a morning person." We stared at each other in silence, while I waited for his reply, an acknowledgment that I was right. When he didn't respond, I continued, "And how did you get into my house? Sitting there while I slept. That's just creepy, you know."

He slowly abandoned his position by the window, his stride slow and deliberate. He moved like a damn wolf stalking its prey. I had the urge to scoot away, but where would I go really? The other side of the bed. Like that would save me.

He sat down onto the bed, his weight shifting the mattress and having my body tilt his way. God, his heat felt amazing. Especially with the cooler temperature that had started. I wanted to absorb his warmth and cuddle up under my covers, then go back to sleep and pretend this conversation didn't happen.

His big hand came up to cup my face, his palm warming my skin. "We are getting married today."

"No," I mumbled. "You said next weekend."

"Now, I am saying today," he retorted, a slight agitation in his voice.

“But why?” I mumbled. “I didn’t have a proper discussion with the twins. And we just told Mary yesterday that the wedding is in a week.”

“Call them.” His voice was firm and something told me there would be no changing his mind. “They are awake. And when your girls wake up, we’ll tell them together.”

“Why move the date?” I questioned him. It didn’t make any sense, a week didn’t make a difference. *Unless he is moving it on a whim,* I thought wryly.

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Chapter Twenty-One

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NICO

I watched Bianca's eyes widen. There was no changing the date. The fact that Jenna was Benito's spy and she knew my plan of marrying Bianca, there was no option for delaying this wedding. She had already informed Benito of the wedding being next week.

This wedding had to happen today. I wasn't taking any chances.

Last night's admission by Jenna was unexpected. Benito killed Bianca's husband to get his dirty paws on her. Jenna Palermo was dead, but there was one question I didn't ask. Whether Benito had William Carter on his radar before or after I went after him. I suspected the answer.

I'd never let Benito get his hands on Bianca or sell her to one of his associates. She was mine. He wanted war; I'd give it to him. I'd burn the motherfucker down and everything he owned, including his son, Marco King. That fucking opportunistic, selfish prick! All Benito saw in Bianca was the money maker she could be for him so the opportunist latched onto it.

To make matters even more interesting, I found out Bianca's grandfather had a gambling debt with Benito King at Casino Royale, a casino that had been in my family for the past three generations. And guess who facilitated the

gambling between Bianca's ancestor and Benito? My own fucking father.

I was starting to suspect Bianca's family was part of the fucking Belles arrangement. It would fit the profile - debt owed, her mother was under Benito's clutches. Benito got greedy and wanted the Catalano connection. The family's ownership of property on the Amalfi Coast would grant him free movement of flesh.

Using my best hacker in Cassidy Tech, I found the trail of the agreement that Jenna mentioned. Benito was selling Bianca to Vladimir Solonik, a Russian Bratva and a tough motherfucker. He had already made a payment. Ten million dollars. All my intel still showed Benito didn't know that Bianca was his daughter. The question was how did he expect to get his paws on her property if he sold her to a Russian.

"Wait, how do you know my in-laws are awake already?" It took Bianca a second to process my words. I caught her off guard being here so early. But she was smart, there was no need to answer that question. "You have someone watching them too?" Her eyebrows scrunched. "But why?"

I had them watched because I didn't trust them nor Bianca not to flee. Besides, with her girls spending so much time with their grandparents, I wanted to ensure they were safe. Now, I'd have to watch them to ensure Benito wouldn't use them as retribution.

"Hurry up and get ready," I ordered her. Whether she wanted to or not, we were getting married today. Leonardo had everything prepared. Cassio and Luca were coming too, along with Luciano and his wife and their boy. The latter would be to persuade Bianca that it was possible to raise a family in our circles. Hopefully, Grace wouldn't bring up the shit that happened between her husband and her. It wasn't something you brought up in a casual conversation.

I could only imagine Bianca's face if Grace told her that Luciano put a gun to his wife's head. She'd take her girls and run.

"Nico, please be reasonable," Bianca pleaded. "My girls will be terrified. They just met you. They won't understand why you are suddenly around all the time."

"Children are adaptable," I assured her. It was the only way to ensure this plan I have been scheming for the past two years came to fruition. Besides, it would keep her and her girls safe from Benito and Vladimir. "Get ready, and when they wake up, we'll tell them."

"I wish I had that money," she spat out, anger on her face. "I'd shove it down your throat."

I chuckled at her spirit. The money wouldn't have saved her, but she didn't need to know that. "It would seem my wife isn't a morning person."

"I'm not your wife," she snapped.

"Not yet, but in a few hours."

She sighed heavily and a little glimmer of regret played in my chest, but I decidedly pushed it away. Regret had no room here.

"This is lunacy," she complained, but she dragged herself out of the bed. My eyes traveled down her body, wearing only hot pink boyshort panties and a white slim tank top. Her skin was smooth, much paler than mine and despite her petite frame, she had soft curves. My cock stirred to life, ready to pounce on her and claim her. She had been constantly on my mind along with those little moans she made as I ate her pussy in the middle of the damn restaurant. I hadn't been able to get rid of my hard-on.

Voices carried over through the closed windows, and I watched Bianca's slim body rush to see what was going on.

"What the fuck is going on here?" she exclaimed and whipped around, glaring at me. "Why are there a boatload of people in my yard?"

Her dark eyes flashed with anger again, and her cheeks flushed. Damn it, I wanted to fuck her here, right now.

“We are getting married here,” I told her. I was buying time, counting on Benito to assume the wedding would take place on my property, and it was happening next week.

“Something is seriously wrong with you,” she snapped in an exasperated tone. “I don’t want to get married today.”

I strode towards her, towering over her. Despite her petite body, she somehow seemed taller when she was pissed off. She stood her ground, her hands on her hips, our bodies flushed together.

Both of my hands reached out, my fingers digging into her soft hips. I knew they’d leave a mark, and I didn’t give a shit. Let everyone know she was mine.

I lowered my head, our lips only inches apart.

“This is not a negotiation, Cara Mia,” I purred with an undertone of threat. “In two hours, you’ll be Mrs. Morrelli.” She stood there, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and stubbornness in those dark depths. She’d be the death of me. “Start. Getting. Ready. Now.”

I watched her throat bob as she swallowed; fear flashed in her eyes, but she refused to cower.

“Fuck. You. Nico. This wasn’t the agreement.” She huffed a frustrated breath. “You can’t change agreements on the fly.”

“Bianca, get in the shower.” She rolled her eyes at me. I had to fight the urge to bend her over and smack her ass. “Now!”

We stared at each other, both of us refusing to back down. This would be fun when I take her to bed, but right now, I just wanted her to get a move on.

“Nico, it is too soon,” she reversed back to a begging technique. “Besides, shouldn’t we get a prenup? It’s only smart, you know. Otherwise, when we divorce, I could get half of everything.” Damn it, this woman tested my patience. Then her eyes flashed and she continued in a

hopeful tone. “I mean, I don’t even have a white dress. I wore my only white dress yesterday.”

I smirked. I’d marry her naked if I could ensure nobody else saw what was mine. “Not to worry, Cara Mia. I took care of the dress.” And I certainly wasn’t worried about the prenup. She’d be mine forever.

Hope extinguished in her eyes and her frustration came back.

“When did you decide that the wedding is today?” she hissed.

“Yesterday,” I deadpanned.

“And you didn’t think that maybe you should tell me too?”

“No.”

“And if I don’t want to do it?” She tilted her chin up showing her stubbornness.

“You are doing it,” I told her. “Just think of your kids.”

A sharp gasp left her full lips.

“You- you’d threaten them?” she asked, her eyes wide and full of terror. I would never hurt them, but apparently Bianca thought the worst of me. “You played hopscotch with them!”

I frowned at her reasoning. From all the things for her to say, that one made the least amount of sense. Bianca was a puzzle. Yes, I was using her in my revenge, but I’d never hurt her girls nor her. There were worse things in this life than marrying me. At least I hoped so.

The attraction was there. I’d be a faithful husband, and I’d protect her and our children. What more was there?

“Nico, please.” This time her voice was weaker than normal. Bianca’s small hands pressed against my chest, as if she was pleading directly to my heart. “You have to cancel this. Getting married today is madness.”

“Sorry to disappoint, Bianca,” I said. “But we are getting married in two hours, rain or shine.”

I pressed my lips against hers. A soft gasp of surprise gave me just an opening I needed. Fuck, she was perfect. Her soft lips, her lilac smell. My tongue brushed against hers, pushing through, exploring her mouth. Her body was so responsive, and at this moment, I was prepared to take her right here and right now. The ceremony be damned.

The bedroom flew open and her twins came running in.

“Mommy, Mommy,” they both squealed, completely unperturbed that I was in the bedroom. “Oh, hey Nico.”

“Hey girls,” I greeted them with a smile, giving a pointed look to Bianca. She narrowed her eyes, then glared.

“Guess what?” They both exclaimed. “There are a bunch of people outside. We went to tell Bear so he can protect us, but he said,” Arianna ran out of breath, so Hannah continued, “That we are having a wedding.” She screamed the last word, then they both started jumping. “You and Nico are getting married. Yaaaaay!”

Bianca paled a few shades and looked like she was ready to faint, but she forced a smile on her face. It looked more like a grimace.

“Girls, have Bear feed you breakfast,” I told them both. “Mommy has to get ready for the wedding. There is a chef downstairs that will prepare you whatever you want.”

“Whatever we want?” Arianna’s wide smile held a note of mischievousness to it. I could practically see in her expression she contemplated something she wasn’t supposed to eat for breakfast.

“Whatever you want,” I confirmed. Without another look to either one of us, both took off to find Bear and the new chef.

“You are such a skilled liar,” she muttered.

I shrugged my shoulder. “Let’s get you in the shower.”

I didn’t trust her to do something stupid so I followed her into the bathroom.

“You don’t really expect me to shower while you are staring?” she hissed, her anger back. Good, that was better than seeing her pale, ready to faint.

I turned around and faced the door, offering her privacy. Soon I’d see all of her naked, so the modesty was pointless, but I’d pick my battles with her.

“My friend’s wife will be here shortly,” I told her. “Grace Vitale. She’ll help you get ready. There is a hairdresser and make-up artist coming. You can tell them what you envision for yourself.”

“Whatever.” She was pissed off. It wasn’t a good start to our marriage, but it was a necessary one.

I heard her moving around the bathroom, starting the shower.

“I need to use the toilet,” she gritted out.

“Then use it.”

I turned my head and met her furious gaze in the mirror. “I need some privacy,” she hissed, her eyes murderous.

“You might as well get used to it,” I drawled. “Tonight, every inch of you will be mine.”

Her mouth parted in shock, and for a moment she was silenced. “Stronzo,” she spat out in Italian. She called me a turd; although I had a feeling she had even worse names for me.

She turned her back to me, muttering under her breath and then slammed the door separating to the toilet room. She wasn’t long, then she came out, sent a glare my way and proceeded to the sink to brush her teeth, then opening the shower door, and closing the glass a bit too forcefully.

Resisting the temptation to glance in the mirror and catch a glimpse of her body, I focused my eyes on the items Bianca had on the counter. A bottle of perfume, lotions, and… birth control?

I remembered she told me she was on birth control, but knowing Bianca was protected from getting pregnant when we consummate our marriage didn’t fill me with any relief.

Throwing a glance in the mirror, I noticed Bianca's back turned to me so I grabbed the packet and read the name of the prescription. Then I pulled out my phone and sent a note to Leonardo.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

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BIANCA

To say I was pissed off was putting it mildly. Once I was done with the shower, I wrapped the biggest towel around me, ignoring Nico who stood there like a jailor. Forced bride took on a whole new meaning with him.

I was so mad, I could spit fire. No sooner than I was out of the shower with my hair wrapped to dry, three women strode into my bedroom.

“Hey Nico,” a red haired woman greeted him. She was beautiful, her red hair a stark contrast against her light skin and the most unusual colored eyes. I had never seen anyone with those indigo colored eyes.

Nico strode over to her and pressed a kiss on her cheek. “Grace, thank you for coming on such short notice. Luciano is here too, I presume.”

I didn’t want to examine why it bothered me to see him kiss another woman. I scoffed out loud and everyone’s eyes came to me. I didn’t give a shit. He was practically dragging me down the aisle, I had every right to be disgruntled.

Grace returned her attention to Nico and answered his question by rolling her eyes and chuckling. “Of course. I think he’s still worried I’d take off and leave him.”

I raised my eyebrow. That was an odd thing to say. Maybe she was forced too, although right now she looked happy. Her unusual colored eyes shifted to me, and I offered her a tight smile. I couldn't feign happiness right now, and certainly not this early.

"Grace, this is Bianca Morrelli." Nico started the introduction and my head snapped to him.

"Not yet."

Grace chuckled.

"That's right, Nico," Grace agreed with me, surprising me. "Not yet. Now, go hang out with the boys until the bride is ready."

I bit my lip to stop myself from saying I'd never be ready. After all, I agreed to marry him, but changing it up on me without even discussing it with me first, rubbed me the wrong way.

Nico's gray eyes met mine and just like always, I couldn't tell a damn thing he was thinking.

He strode over to me and pressed a kiss on my cheek, sending unwelcomed shivers down my spine. "See you in a bit," he whispered low into my ear.

"Nico, remind Ella to help with the girls' dresses," Grace shouted after him, then turned her eyes at me. "I got them flower girl dresses. Ella is great, you'll love her. She helped me raise Matteo when we were on the run."

Huh?

She chuckled as if she could hear my thoughts. "It's a long story. But you can trust her."

"If I knew I was getting married today, I would have taken care of it myself," I muttered. "Or ran. The latter sounds like a better plan."

She tilted her head and her eyes softened.

"I know how you feel. My beginning with Luciano was rough." Her face lit up at the mention of her husband. "Really rough, but I couldn't be happier now. And trust me,

despite Nico's hard exterior, he'll be good to you and your girls."

I huffed at that statement. He just fucking threatened me and my girls.

"Trust me on this, Bianca," she added. "Everything isn't always as it appears."

I smiled but her statement didn't make me feel any better. Even if he turned out to be as Grace said, a time would come where I would have to leave. For my daughters' sake.

For the next hour, Grace, the hairdresser, and the makeup artist transformed me into a bride. I could hardly recognize myself. This wedding gown was exquisite, just what I would have picked out if I shopped for a wedding dress. The strapless bodice hugged my curves and had an open back. The dress waterfalled down to the ground with a long train. It was elegant with a wow effect, yet still simple. It even had matching wedding slippers with a three inch heel.

The hairdresser recommended putting my hair into a loose but fancy bun. I let her do whatever she wanted but she was right. It left my neckline open and Nico sent the most extravagant piece of jewelry I had ever seen. It would be the only jewelry I'd wear, besides the rings.

"Nico is going to lose his shit," Grace and Ella announced at the same time. I found that those two often thought in sync. Whatever they went through, it made them very close. It made me a tiny bit jealous that I never had that and never would, since sooner or later, I'd be living who knew where. Maybe I had a few years or maybe just a few months. "I bet he doesn't make it through the whole ceremony before his hands are all over you," Ella teased.

I wasn't sure if I should be happy about that or not. Ella married Luciano Vitale's cousin. Luciano was Grace's husband. I guess it was appropriate that two best friends married two cousins that also happened to live together.

I wondered if William was rolling over in his grave. I was getting married in the home we built together, our house and lawn were flooded with mobsters and their wives. *A small wedding*, I was told, but everywhere I looked, there were people. Probably bodyguards to all the damn mobsters.

"You ready?" Grace asked.

I wasn't. I would never be ready, but it wasn't as if I had a choice. Instead, I nodded because I couldn't bring myself to speak.

Grace and Ella shared a look. "Do you need a few more minutes?" A few minutes wouldn't be enough, I wanted to say. Instead, I just remained silent. "Everything will be okay," Grace said with conviction that I didn't feel.

"Can I see the girls?" I finally asked, my voice hoarse from the unshed tears and rattled nerves.

"I'll go get them," Ella announced and hurried out of the room.

"Bianca, just trust your gut." The look Grace gave me was full of assurances. But she couldn't know everything that loomed over the twins' and my head. "Be strong and everything will work out. Trust me, it worked out for me too."

The twins ran into the room, like mini cyclones, and instantly, I felt at least a bit lighter seeing their big smiles.

They twirled around, showing off their dresses, both speaking at the same time, but I could hardly understand what they were saying.

"Oh my Gosh," I beamed, forcing a big smile on my face. "Both of you look so beautiful. My beautiful baby girls."

It was as if they only now saw me, both of their eyes widened. "Wow," they both breathed out at the same time. "You look like a princess."

I lowered down, though the dress material felt a bit constricting. I didn't care; I needed to hug them. I opened my arms and both of them ran into them. I held on tight,

sending a silent prayer that I wasn't putting them in more danger by doing this. My mother sacrificed so much for me and my daughters. I couldn't let it all be for nothing.

"Let me fix your hair," I choked out with a small smile. "I hugged you so tightly I messed up your beautiful hairstyle."

I just now noticed a boy similar in age to my girls in the room.

"Ah, Bianca, this is my son," Grace introduced. "Matteo Vitale."

"I'm going to marry him," Hannah announced and all of us burst into laughter.

"Hello Matteo," I extended my hand his way and he took it. "Nice to meet you. You look very handsome in your suit. I love it." He smiled. Darn little kid was a cutie pie. "You can't marry my daughter though," I warned him jokingly.

"I see my son is breaking hearts already," a man walked in and I raised my eyes. Holy smokes! There was hotness standing in the doorway of my bedroom. The guy was fucking gorgeous.

Not as hot as Nico, of course. The moment I thought that, I immediately scolded myself. It didn't matter but still. The tattoos on the guy would regularly make me run, but I couldn't tear my gaze away from him.

"Bianca, this is my husband," Grace announced. "Luciano Vitale. And before you think he did something better than Nico, he didn't."

My eyes traveled between the two, and I would have never guessed they would be a couple. She looked polished while he looked like total badass hotness. Like a bad boy my grandmother would have warned me to steer away from.

"Jesus, you have a lot of tattoos," I muttered, at a loss for words.

He chuckled. "You must be Bianca." Extending his hand, I shook it. "Cassio will walk you down the aisle."

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” I muttered. “My dad already walked me down the aisle. I’m good.”

Luciano chuckled. “Nico insists.”

“Well, Nico can go f-” I cut myself off. These were his friends and mobsters. I couldn’t talk like that. They could shoot us all dead in my house.

“I agree.” Another man came in behind Luciano. It must be Cassio. *Jesus, are all mobsters hot like this?* Talk about a great gene pool. “Nico can go fuck himself, but since he asked nicely, I agreed to walk you down the aisle, Bianca.”

I just stared at him. This guy had tattoos on his neck and hands, just like Luciano. I wondered where else, but I’d rather die than ask. Though it made me wonder if Nico had them. He wore his Armani suits, looking polished, but I kept seeing a hint of ink, right under his collar or even his sleeve.

I’ll find out tonight.

Oh my gosh, I would have sex with him tonight.

“Oh, fuck,” I muttered, suddenly my breathing labored. I bent down, leaning on my knees, not even caring if my boobs came out of my strapless dress. I couldn’t think about sex with him. It was getting too hot in here. *Don’t think about sex with him.* “I’m not ready. I’m not ready. I need a week,” I rambled. “Just a week, maybe two.”

I started fanning myself with my hand, probably looking like a lunatic. I wasn’t far off.

I straightened up, my hands on my cheeks.

“Can someone turn on the A/C?” I breathed, a sudden hot flash sure to turn me into a melting puddle. “Too hot.”

“Okay, everyone out,” Grace ordered. “Except for Cassio.”

My eyes darted around, looking for any way out. “Maybe I could jump out the window,” I mumbled to myself, heading in that direction.

“Whoa, whoa,” Cassio took my hand, stopping me from making another step. “We are not taking a shortcut through

the window. I'm pretty flexible but not that agile. We'll walk down the stairs, if you don't mind."

I raised my eyes and met his dark gaze. He smiled and something about it, soothed my panic. So I absorbed it, needing that calmness right now.

"Nico is the best one of us all," he deadpanned. He meant to comfort me, but it didn't sound very comforting. Grace must have thought the same.

"That is not helping, Cassio," she scolded him. "Bianca, trust me on this. With these fucked up men," she pointed to Cassio who narrowed his eyes on her, "including my husband in that statement, you can count on one thing. They'll make sure you are and your girls are safe. No matter what."

She believed it, I could tell by the honesty in her eyes. But there wouldn't be any saving my girls or me once Benito King came to collect.

I nodded, because there was nothing else I could possibly tell them.

"Good, now let's go get you married before Nico blows up my phone," Cassio announced, grinning.

"I have never seen a man so eager to get married," Grace chuckled. "A good sign for the start." The house was empty as we made our way downstairs, Cassio being a perfect gentleman and helping me, along with Grace. "Your twins will be little flower girls," Grace continued, explaining the ceremony I knew nothing about since it was thrown my way at the last minute. "I hope you don't mind but Hannah made Matteo a flower boy," she winced at that.

"I don't care," I told her. "Hannah probably doesn't want him out of her sight."

All three of us chuckled. We were in the living room, heading for the large French doors that sat open, the view of the backyard completely done up and looking unrecognizable. The large yard overlooking the bay was

turned into a luxury outdoor wedding. The open view of the bay spread in the distance and it helped to calm my nerves.

There weren't as many people here as I initially thought, but more than I've ever had over at my house. There were around thirty people here, and I never had so many guests here before.

"Ready?" Cassio asked.

I gave him a side glance. "If I say no, will it matter?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sure I want to know what Nico and you got into," he muttered. "But I can tell you one thing, Bianca. He is not letting you go. He'll turn every city upside down to find you."

"Wonderful," I murmured. "Just what I needed. Another psychopath." I forced myself to take a step over the threshold and onto the patio. I allowed my gaze to search out my future husband and my breath hitched.

There he was.

Nico Morrelli, the king of the Maryland and D.C. underworld.

Waiting for me.

The music filled the air, "Pachelbel's Canon" in D Major. My heart drummed against my ribs so hard it hurt.

Stuck in my place, I stared at this man. In a short amount of days, he had shaken my entire world. Tilted my universe. He stirred something inside me that scared me. I have never physically gravitated to a man before. This was too intense, too hot, too dangerous.

Yet, it felt right when he held me.

Nico and I stared at each other, his gaze pulling me forward, demanding me to continue walking. It was as if the entire universe halted, leaving me alone in the world with him. My body wanted to obey, but my mind rebelled, resisted… I didn't know.

Cassio gently tugged me along, urging me to move.

One step. Another. And another.

Red rose petals covered my path and were squashed under my shoes, burying into the dirt. I couldn’t quite decide if it was romantic or ominous.

My girls and Matteo walked in front of us, and if I was honest with myself, the wedding, the kids, and the groom were perfect.

I hoped for a hero in disguise.

I got a deceiver.

A liar.

Loud sounds, yelling, interrupted the moment and my step faltered. I was halfway down the aisle.

“Bianca,” a familiar voice called out through the yard. I turned my head in the direction of the loud voices and saw John struggling against Bear.

Before I realized, I pulled my arm out of Cassio’s arm, lifted my long dress and ran towards him.

“Hey,” I yelled. “Bear, let him go.”

Commotion broke out all around me, but all my focus was on John and ensuring Bear didn’t hurt him.

“Bianca, slow down,” Grace called out behind me. “I’m trying to save your wedding dress and this long-ass train.”

“Just leave it,” I told her and in another few steps came to a stop, in front of Nico's men. All of them surrounded John like he was a criminal, yet criminals were all over my lawn. Bear had him lifted up into the air by his Polo shirt. Tugging on Bear’s arm, I hissed at him. “He's a friend. Get your hands off of him.”

Bear looked to someone over my head, and I followed his gaze. Nico was behind me, his stormy gray eyes clearly showing he was furious. I didn’t give a shit. He couldn’t manhandle my friends like that.

“Nico, tell Bear to let him go,” I demanded. He didn’t move or say anything. “Nico!” I screeched. “Tell him to let John go.”

“Bianca, what is going on?” John squealed, struggling to speak. “Why are you marrying him?”

Nico took over from Bear and punched John right into his face.

“Nico!” I screamed. “What the fuck?”

My eyes darted around frantically, seeking help. Nobody even moved, the expressions on their faces bored, like this was an everyday occurrence. What was wrong with these people?

John wasn’t a small guy, years of playing football made him strong enough to hold his own. Well, not against Nico Morrelli apparently. Because Nico was using him as a damn punching bag. John tried his best but hadn’t landed a hit yet.

Since nobody bothered to stop the two idiots, I jumped on Nico’s back, wrapping my arms around him.

“Stop it right now,” I yelled at him. This wedding turned into a damn circus show. “Now, Nico! I mean it or I’ll-” what will I do? What could I threaten him with? “Or you can kiss this wedding goodbye!” I shouted, before I could hold the words back.

He immediately straightened, giving a silent nod to Bear to restrain John.

I pointed my finger at Bear. “Don’t you touch him or hit him. Understood?” Bear raised his eyebrow, one side of his lip tilting to the side. Whether it was in displeasure or a smile, I’d never know.

“Bianca, why are you-” John started but I immediately cut him off.

“Stop it,” I hissed, his eyes darting between Nico and I, then shifting to the rest of the crowd. It didn’t take a genius to see that my yard was full of dangerous men.

I turned my back to John and glared at Nico. “Are you mental?”

“Tell me you didn’t fucking invite him to our wedding,” he replied, his voice ice cold.

“Are you for fucking real?” I asked him. “When do you think I could have sent the invite? While I was in the

shower this morning and you kept guard?”

Grace’s husband snickered in the background and suddenly both Nico and I glared at him.

“I didn’t say anything,” he quickly defended himself with a big smile on his face. Nice to see someone found this amusing.

I looked out and saw that Ella had ushered Matteo and the girls back into the house.

“Don’t worry,” Grace said, seeing me looking at the children. “They didn’t see anything. Ella distracted them with candy.”

“I guess that’s good,” I muttered. “They can be jacked up all day on sugar.”

Grace shrugged her one shoulder, unconcerned. If I had to pick between sugar or fight, I’d pick sugar too.

A guy with pale blond hair that looked like an MMA fighter approached our crowd and grinned. “I’ve got to give it to you. The party hasn’t even started, and I am fucking loving it.”

“Who in the hell are you?” I demanded.

“Sasha Nikolaev,” he made a bow. “At your service.”

Weirdo!

“Listen buddy,” I muttered, annoyed at this clusterfuck. “This is not a drama club so get going. Nothing for you to see here.”

A woman with dark brown hair chuckled and tugged him away. “You asked for that one, Sasha.”

“I like her,” the guy winked at me as he went along with the woman.

Inhaling a deep breath, I faced Nico and John.

Nico didn’t even look frazzled, his expensive Brioni tuxedo looking as pristine as ever. John, on the other hand, looked like he’d gotten run over by a train. His eye was slowly starting to swell, his shirt crooked, and his hair disheveled.

“What’s going on, Bianca?” John questioned, his lip slightly swollen. “You couldn’t even call and tell me you are getting married. To ***this*** guy! I have to hear it from Angie.”

I cleared my throat uncomfortably. Truth was that it never even occurred to me to call John and tell him about what was happening. He was William’s best friend and took it upon himself to look after us after William passed away, but he had enough of his own issues.

“It hadn’t crossed my mind,” I exhaled. “Everything happened so fast.”

“And how did Angie know?” he accused.

“I didn’t tell her,” I muttered. “Someone else told her.”

“Listen, John,” Nico interrupted, a threatening look in his gaze. “This is neither the time nor place for your little visit.”

I cringed at Nico’s directness. I had to agree, it wasn’t the best time to visit, and it wasn’t the best move on John’s part to muscle his way through the security guards. But Nico muscled his way too, forcing this wedding on me.

“That’s not fair,” I told Nico. “You have *your* friends here, and I haven’t said a word.” I glanced at Cassio, Luciano, and the rest of the crew. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Cassio retorted.

“Bianca, he-”

“He nothing, Nico.” I cut him off. “If John wants to stay, he’s staying.”

The tension was thick between Nico and me, a battle of wills tugging back and forth. I knew if he decided to throw him out, I could do nothing to stop him… short of screaming and crying. It still wouldn’t help. But I refused to let him punch his way into getting what he wanted. I refused to be his doormat, no matter how good he kissed.

The storm in his eyes reflected the storm in my heart and soul. Maybe I had finally lost my sanity. Maybe all my marbles got fried by the mind-blowing orgasm he gave me. The way he set my body on fire but still made me feel

comfortable with myself didn't make any sense. He was dangerous, yet instinctively I trusted him with my body. I knew nobody else could take me to those amazing heights.

This man in front of me could end me with the snap of his fingers and nobody would even think to question my disappearance. Yet, something about him also fueled the strength in me.

To fight. To stand my ground. To stand up to him and the world.

"Is that what ***you*** want?" Nico surprised me with my question as he nodded in John's direction. What was he implying?

I glanced around us. "Do you all mind giving us some privacy please?" Everyone dispersed, but John remained in his spot. "You too, John." He opened his mouth, but I cut him off. "Please."

"Fine, fine," he muttered and left us alone.

"What's the problem here?" I asked Nico in a low voice, ensuring nobody else could hear us.

"I want to know if ***you*** want ***him***."

I shook my head. "As a friend, yes." I let the words sink in. Taking a step forward, my hands reached out, gripping his suit jacket in between my fingers and tugging him lower. He was too tall. He bent his head, and I lifted my eyes to meet his.

"I know this is a temporary arrangement," I murmured. Something crossed his features, but he quickly masked it. "But you can't just erase my entire life. John is a friend. I already told you that. I wouldn't dream of telling you to get rid of your friends." When he didn't say a thing, I continued. "I'm pissed off you threw this on me without consulting with me, and I'm pissed off you hit my best friend, but please remember one thing. I will ***never*** do something just to piss you off. I sensed yesterday you didn't like him. Even if I knew about the wedding and sent the

invite, I wouldn’t have invited him without talking to you about it.”

Our gazes locked, my voice was firm, but my insides shook. It felt important he understood I’d never manipulate him. He sighed and held out his free hand.

“You are going to break me, aren’t you?”

Something shifted and I wasn’t sure what. I chuckled softly.

“I certainly hope not.” I looked at his profile. “So you agree that John can stay?” I asked softly.

“Yes, your friend can stay.” It was like getting a gift on Christmas morning.

“Nico?” I squeezed his hand gently.

“Hmmm?” The ruthless man was gone and the man that got under my skin was back.

“No more surprises like today. Okay?”

I swore regret, or something like it, passed his expression. My instinct told me to push him about it, ask him if there was anything else he needed to tell me but before I opened my mouth, he beat me to it.

“Good plan.” He pressed a kiss on my cheek. “You look gorgeous.” My body warmed at his compliment and the heat in his gaze. “Now let’s get married, Cara Mia.”

“Okay.” Like a dolt, when he looked at me like that, I was in danger of doing anything he demanded.

Nico nodded at Bear, I guess an unspoken signal that John was good to stay.

“All good?” Cassio asked, glancing between the two of us.

I nodded and John approached. “You’re going to get cleaned up?”

“Yeah. Your bodyguard,” he tilted his chin at Bear, “demands it.”

John glared at Nico, and I quickly reprimanded him. “John, don’t start any more shit. Or I’ll call your mother.”

He rolled his eyes. “That only worked ten years ago,” he grunted but headed into the house. Nico left to take his spot at the end of the line decorated by red roses on each end.

“Now, let’s get you married,” Grace fixed the train in the back, while Ella instructed the kids to go ahead and throw flower petals on the ground. “Before another fight breaks out.”

I wholeheartedly agreed. Today couldn’t end soon enough. And then… Jesus, I couldn’t think about tonight, otherwise I’d melt into a puddle.

“Pachelbel’s Canon” resumed and Cassio offered his arm.

“What’s your full name again?” I asked Cassio, looping my hand through his arm.

Everyone’s eyes were on us, as we made our way down the makeshift aisle, surrounded by flowers. The day started off rough. But it could only get better from here. Right?

“Cassio King,” he replied. I lost my step and would have stumbled if not for Cassio catching me.

Oh my God! Did they catch me, and I didn’t even know?

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Chapter Twenty-Three

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NICO

I beat up Bianca's best friend on the day of our wedding.

She forgave me.

I forced marriage on her.

She forgave me.

Though I didn't think she would forgive me once my plan unfolded. Yet I still went through it.

Why?

Because I made a promise to my sister, as she bled in my arms, that I'd make that son of a bitch pay. And Bianca was the only weak link I had found. To make it personal.

Woman for woman.

His daughter for my sister.

It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. And I never fucking wanted anything as much as I wanted Bianca. My heart thundered inside my chest, unlike ever before, with each step she took towards me. I forced this marriage on her but it didn't diminish the deep affection I had for her. Yes, there was this incredible desire and lust but even stronger was tenderness.

I purposely asked Cassio to walk her down the aisle, knowing it would be a responsibility honored to him if he knew they were siblings. It was the least I could do.

It was common knowledge that Benito always wanted a daughter. To parade around, to show off, to use to make a high trade and expand his power. He didn't know he had one, but he soon would.

The moment I consummated my marriage, I intended to make it known.

When Bianca asked for no more surprises, I was so damn tempted to tell her. But it would mean failure, a broken promise.

The priest spoke and my hand found the exposed skin on her back. I had to feel her skin and needed her close to me. When John showed up, I lost my shit and jealousy ate at me. Those two were close and had a bond from childhood. I believed her when she said she never had a romantic relationship with him, the background check confirmed it, but the feeling of jealousy was hard to control.

Bianca leaned into my palm, without even realizing it. She nervously chewed on her bottom lip.

When it was time to say our vows, Bianca turned to me, and with a startling realization, I realized she was holding back her whimpers by chewing on her bottom lip. The most beautiful, soft emotions I ever saw shone in her eyes.

A shaky, soft smile on her face was a punch in the gut for the betrayal I was about to make.

You can still make it right, my mind whispered.

But I didn't.

If I'd let her go, she'd run and never look back. I wanted her - to own, to possess, to ruin. So she'd be ruined for anyone else.

She'd be my revenge - and my fantasy - come true.

I took both her hands in mine, spoke the words and promises I intended to keep.

I slipped a new ring on her finger, a blue and red diamond band. Hope and blood. The diamond stones were rare, but so was she. Bianca slipped a tungsten wedding

band on mine. She stared at the ring, a creased eyebrow the only indication something bothered her.

“What is it?” I whispered, leaning in.

Her cognac colored eyes met mine, one tear escaping down her cheek, and I couldn’t resist collecting it with my lips.

Our faces close together, her soft breaths flowed over to me. She was nervous, her chest heaved up and down, her breasts pressed against my chest. It was always like this with this woman. The friction between us sparked like 4th of July fireworks.

No other woman had ever made me wish for something more. Bianca made me hunger for unconditional love, acceptance, and all of her touches. A lover’s touch.

“Just feels different,” she murmured softly.

Her eyes turned a darker, deeper brown with desire burning in them, matching my own. The priest said the final words and even before he pronounced us husband and wife, my lips pressed on hers, sealing the eternal deal.

I had become addicted to her flavor, her touch, her scent.

She was forever mine. I was forever hers.

Pressing her harder against me, I raked my teeth over her full bottom lip. Her eyes fluttered shut, like she was giving herself to me and there was no mistaking that her heart beat frantically.

“Mi fai impazzire di desiderio,” I whispered against her lips*. You drive me crazy with desire.*

The problem was it wasn’t just desire. I was starving for her. I wanted to consume her, body, heart, and soul. The selfish bastard in me wanted it all.

My mouth clashed with hers, tasting her. That unique taste of hers was my high. Bianca Morrelli was definitely my kryptonite.

Her hands had taken my suit jacket and locked down, holding me close to her. The bastard in me was glad to

know she was just as impacted by me as I was by her. My one hand wrapped around the nape of her head while I kept the other on her lower back, her exposed skin, pressing her against me.

Soft noises sounded in her throat, making me wild. My tongue swirled with hers in perfect harmony. She met each demand in the sweetest surrender, her submission stealing vital parts of me.

She was all mine.

Forever.

My wife and I headed for the dance floor that had been set up on the north side of Bianca's property.

Everyone watched as I wrapped my wife into my arms for our first dance as husband and wife.

My wife.

I never expected it. Never wanted it. This was supposed to be about revenge, a business arrangement, but somehow it became so much more. I held her firmly against me, our bodies fitting perfectly despite our size difference. My hand curved around her waist, her curves soft against my hardness.

"You know," she smiled softly. "For such a big guy, you are quite a smooth operator on the dance floor."

I raised my eyebrow. "Big guy?"

She shrugged. "Well, you are not exactly a small guy. You tower over most people, and I have never seen a man with broad shoulders like yours." She danced well, her small body fit perfect against mine. "You probably spend hours in the gym every day. Your friends too."

Her eyes shifted to where Cassio, Luca, Luciano, and Raphael stood with Vasili Nikolaev and his two brothers. I

could only imagine what Bianca thought of them. We didn’t exactly give off soccer dad vibes.

Her twins ran around with Matteo, occupied with their kids' games. Grace, Isabella, and Ella sat around, happy that the wedding went by without a glitch. It was only thanks to them that it happened. I might have forced Bianca into this marriage, but I still wanted to make it special.

“So who is Cassio King?” Bianca’s back slightly tensed under my palm, and I searched out her face.

“My friend,” I told her. “A good one.”

“Hmmm.” I wanted to see if she’d add anything else. “You’ve known him for a long time? And his brother? What about Luciano? And the other guys?”

I chuckled. “Curious, aren’t you?” She rolled her eyes at me, and damn it, if I didn’t find it sexy. “Luciano and Cassio have known each other the longest. They grew up together. I met both of them and Luca when I was in college. We became friends when I killed the man Cassio’s father sent to kill his sons.”

Bianca’s eyes widened and she stumbled.

“W-what?” Her voice was a hoarse whisper, and now I regretted telling her that. She might be Benito’s daughter, but she grew up in a normal family and environment. “Why?”

“Because he is a sick bastard,” I told her. “They are his illegitimate sons so he treats them badly.”

She visibly paled, and I silently cursed myself. “What about their mother?”

“She killed herself when they were both young.”

“Jesus Christ.”

Nobody even knew the half of it. Cassio was lucky to be alive. The reason both Cassio and Luca survived and turned into decent men was because their grandfather raised them.

“That’s horrible,” she muttered.

“It’s not something to talk about on our wedding day.” I decided to change the subject. Grace offered to watch the girls for the next three days so we’d have a honeymoon. I didn’t think Bianca would go for it, though they’d be guarded better than the president’s daughter. “Do you want to go on a honeymoon?”

She threw her head and laughed. “Are you serious?”

Our first dance ended, but we continued on. I wanted to keep her in my arms.

“Yes.”

“I can’t just throw my kids at their grandparents,” she shook her head.

“How about we have Grace and Ella watch the girls?”

She shook her head. “No, not for that long. They are strangers.”

I nodded. I expected as much. “Would you feel comfortable if Grace and Luciano watched the girls for a night and a day?”

Her eyes traveled across the dance floor and found Hannah hugging Matteo by the swings.

“Now, that worries me,” she muttered, scrunching her eyebrows. “Hannah is the unfriendly one, and she is pretty much going all in with Matteo.”

I grinned. “He is very much like his father. A ladies’ man.”

“Seems to me he is a one lady man,” she retorted. “Yeah, maybe for a night.” A blush spread over her chest, crawling up her neck and climbing into her cheeks. Fuck, she was so sexy, I couldn’t wait to take her to bed.

Another song ended, but the greedy motherfucker I was, I refused to share her with our guests.

“One more song,” I said after our fourth dance. I was determined to make it last as long as I could. The people that mattered were part of our ceremony and witnesses to our marriage, but there would be other guests coming soon. Both, invited and not.

Luciano smiled, every so often searching out his wife. After the fiasco over the last few weeks, things have finally worked out for them. The wife everyone thought dead was back in his life and here to stay.

Vasili never looked away from his wife. A few years back Isabella and Tatiana, Vasili's sister, attended the university in D.C. Vasili was constantly in this area, and I was sure he was poaching. Until I saw the two girls drunk, while underage and trying to gamble in one of my casinos. I thought the man was going to murder them both. But even then, he couldn't peel his eyes off Isabella Taylor. They clearly worked it out, since she was quite a bit along in her pregnancy.

Cassio and Luca seemed content; although Cassio was working on his own marriage arrangement. Sasha kept throwing glances Bianca's way, trying to stir shit. That motherfucker was the best sniper and the worst instigator. His life must be a bore since he constantly sought trouble. And Alexei Nikolaev stood stoic and unreadable as ever. I sensed he made Bianca nervous. When introductions were made between the two, she actually tucked her body into mine as if seeking my protection.

Have I brought Bianca and her girls among the wolves?

The commotion at the front of the house finally forced me to face reality.

"Bianca, I want you to meet someone." I urged her to walk beside me.

"I thought you introduced me to everyone," she complained, rolling her eyes again. "I don't remember half the names."

"These are my parents," I told her, masking my face from all emotions. My father liked to exploit people. He wasn't far off in cruelty from Benito, just weaker. "You'll remember theirs."

"Oh."

Her step faltered and she remained in her spot.

“What?”

She nibbled on her lower lip. “I didn’t realize your parents were alive,” she whispered. “You’re older so I assumed-”

Jesus, she considered me old. I gently smacked her ass. “Be careful how you speak to your husband.”

We resumed walking.

A little giggle escaped her. “Or what? You’ll spank me?” If I wasn’t mistaken, there was a light challenge in her tone.

Game on, wife.

“I just might,” I purred.

She scoffed. “You try and I’ll kick your ass,” she muttered under her breath. We were getting closer to my parents. “My parents never laid their hands on me. I certainly won’t let you spank me.”

I leaned over and gently bit into her earlobe. “You might enjoy it.” She instantly blushed blood red.

Straightening up, I ended the conversation. My parents were just a few feet away.

“Nico, I’m so sorry we are late,” my mother said, her voice slightly drawn. She was drunk already. “I thought the wedding was at noon.”

It was a set up. This morning I called them up right before the ceremony began, to let them know the wedding was at noon. I made sure I spoke to my mother since due to her drinking she often mixed up her dates. If it wasn’t for my mother, I wouldn’t have bothered telling my father, but my mother at least deserved to be here for the wedding reception.

My father grunted, pissed off. “Of course you couldn’t get the time right.”

He was pissed off. Because I suspected he would call Benito King to let him know I was marrying his asset. It was my traitorous father who also participated in a few of the Belles and Mobsters’ bids. My father was one of the

silent bidders on Bianca, but the Russian outbid him. He had crossed the line, and I intended to make him pay. But not today. Today I'd deal with Benito; he wouldn't be far behind my parents.

"No harm done," I deadpanned. "Meet my wife. Bianca Morrelli." I turned to my wife, visible shock in her eyes. "Bianca, my parents. Nancy and Dominic Morrelli."

My father's dark eyes studied Bianca, his gaze traveling down her body, and it took all I had not to pounce on him. Unlike John, my father would never be a harmless admirer. He liked to force himself on women and my mother liked to look the other way, taking younger lovers. While women would never regularly cheat in our world, not unless they wanted to be dead, my mother wasn't from our world. And she held a vast fortune in her name that would never pass to my father, so she was worth more to him alive than dead.

I was surprised those two managed to produce two children, considering how much animosity ran between them. My heart squeezed remembering Nicoletta. While I turned out to be a cruel and cold motherfucker, like my father, Nicoletta was the only one that remained untarnished. Until my father handed her over to Benito.

Bianca extended her hand to my mother. "Nice to meet you. I'm sorry you missed the ceremony."

My mother reached to take her hand, but she missed it all together. She was ***really*** drunk.

"Oops, I'm sorry," my mother muttered, looking slightly embarrassed.

"No worries."

Bianca smiled softly, not letting on to have noticed. When she would have missed my wife's hand again, Bianca moved hers to take my mother's drunk handshake.

After the awkward handshake, my father moved in and I stopped him.

"I don't think so, Father."

He was about to put his filthy hands on her, but I'd be damned if I'd let that happen. I didn't want him in her vicinity, even less touching her. Today was just a necessity. More times than not, she wouldn't see my parents. I regretted my mother, but unless she was willing to let go of her alcohol and gigolos, I couldn't allow her around my wife and the girls.

Bianca sensing the danger, tucked herself closer to me. As if she tried to remedy the situation, and keep my father at bay, she extended her hand.

"Mr. Morrelli, nice to meet you."

Truthfully, I didn't want him even shaking her hand, but unless I was willing to stir more shit and create another scene, I'd have to allow it.

The gleam in my father's eyes told me he knew I didn't want him touching her. So he took her hand and held it.

"The pleasure is all mine," he purred, licking his lips. I should just punch him in the face and get it over with. Bianca's body stiffened in my arms, while she gently tugged on her arm, but my father held it firmly in his, rubbing his thumb over the pulse on her wrist. "Now I can see what all the fuss is about."

I took my wife's hand that he gripped and pulled it out of his handle. His eyes remained glued to her form, and I could only imagine what kind of things he was fantasizing about. Sick bastard!

The next time I allowed him to come around her would be at his funeral.

I let go of Bianca's hand and noted her wiping it on her dress. She had good instincts at least. She didn't like my father; it was written on her face.

"Nico, did you buy another place?" My mother broke the uncomfortable silence, her words stumbling over themselves. "It is kind of demure for your taste. Small and plain."

Leave it to my mother to say something like that. She grew up surrounded by luxury. Even before she married my father, her grandparents, the Cassidy family, were wealthy. The construction boom made them one of the wealthiest families in the country. And they knew how to secure their wealth to ensure the greedy husbands or wives would never walk away with their empire.

Bianca's uncomfortable chuckle followed.

"Ummm, no, it's my place." My mother winced, realizing her rudeness, but Bianca didn't seem to take it to heart. "It was actually an old barnyard," she continued explaining, pride in her voice. "But the location was perfect and had the biggest yard on the entire island. When I saw it, I fell in love with it. It took several years to get it completed," Bianca's eyes moved over the place.

"You did it by yourself?" My mother's voice was full of awe.

"Well no, not by myself," Bianca explained. "John, my best friend," she tilted her head in his direction, "and William, my husband." Sadness crossed her face but she quickly recovered. "My late husband. He died."

I was glad she didn't mention her twins. I instructed Bear to keep the children away as much as possible while my father was around.

Bianca smiled at my mom. "Would you like a tour?" she offered. "It's not grand or anything, but I can tell you the spots where I threw a hammer and screwdriver at my best friend." My mother's laugh rang through the backyard, and it was a sound I haven't heard in a long time.

"Sure, why not?" My mother accepted.

"How about you hold on to my arm?" Bianca offered. "The lawn has uneven spots."

Deep down, the parts that had hardened thanks to my upbringing, cracked seeing how gracefully Bianca handled my mother. I didn't discount the hardship my mother had to endure since she married my father, but she had more

power than to let him do whatever he wanted and use his children in his hunger for power. I knew my mother suffered too, but I couldn’t forgive her for letting Father hand Nicolette over.

She should have told me. She should have warned me.

I would have burned the goddamn city to ashes to keep my sister safe.

I will burn down cities and countries to keep my wife and our daughters safe.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

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BIANCA

I sensed Nico's mother watching me, as if deciding whether she should like me or not. I didn't really care either way. She was drunk, very drunk, but I sensed sadness and heartache surrounding her. I felt sorry for her because it was evident her husband was an asshole.

It was creepy how he leered at me, his calloused thumb rubbing over my pulse. It made me want to have a shower to erase his touch.

"Here, watch your step," I warned her, holding her hand as we climbed the patio stairs.

"Thank you, dear." Her voice was soft, and now that we weren't with her husband and her son, I felt like her posture kind of slumped. As if she kept appearances around those two. Or maybe it was just her husband.

She was a beautiful woman. I tried to pinpoint her age but couldn't quite figure it out. Maybe early sixties, though she could pass for being in her fifties. Her hair was colored chestnut brown with lots of auburn highlights and she had beautiful gray eyes that somehow reminded me of her son's. Nico might have resembled his father, but he had his mother's eyes. Nancy's dress was very exquisite but you barely noticed it with the diamonds she wore around her neck, wrists, and ears.

“The house might not be grand,” she said softly, glancing around at the bay. “But the view is worth a million bucks.”

I stopped and gazed in the same direction, soaking in the horizon. The weather was beautiful, despite it being October.

“It is, isn’t it?” I agreed. “I wouldn’t care to tent here, as long as I could keep this view,” I told her.

She chuckled softly. “Nico won’t allow you to tent. I’d be surprised if he doesn’t have your entire house rebuilt.”

I rolled my eyes. “As long as he doesn’t touch my kitchen.”

Both of us chuckled. “I gather you like to cook.”

I gave her a sheepish smile. “I do. Cook and bake. I also make homemade ice cream. It’s my stress reliever,” I admitted. “Probably not good for my figure and will eventually catch up to me.”

“Nonsense, you are beautiful and just the kind of woman Nico needs.” My head swished in her direction, seeking out her eyes. She had to be joking. I was pretty much only a homemaker, and I enjoyed it. I loved taking care of kids and making a home out of a house.

“You seem surprised,” she remarked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’m not exactly ambitious and haven’t accomplished much.”

“You bought and built this house,” she offered.

“Not exactly,” I told her. “My grandmother and dad helped with the down payment when we bought the house. I put some sweat equity into it, but it wasn’t all me. You know?” It wasn’t something I accomplished all on my own. Besides, I was enroute to losing the home if it wasn’t for Nico. Yes, he blackmailed me into marrying him because William stole from him, but then he poured more money into me by saving my house. It didn’t make sense.

Arianna and Hannah ran over to me, along with Matteo. Ella and Grace trailed behind them. Bear was right behind

them too.

“Mommy, can we go swimming?” They both asked cheerily, while Ella and Grace shook their heads vigorously in the background. “Matteo loves to swim.”

“It is too cold to swim,” I told them. “Besides, there are a lot of people here. What if they all wanted to go for a swim?” I asked. “We don’t have bathing suits for everyone and then their feelings would get hurt.”

“Andiamo in spiaggia,” Matteo asked, hope in his voice. *Let’s go to the beach.*

He surprised me by speaking in Italian. It was clear he was good at it too, his pronunciation perfect.

I shook my head. “No, not now,” I told him. “Your clothes will get ruined. Maybe when everyone leaves. But no swimming. The water is too cold.”

The three of them shared a glance and opted to go play in the playroom. They took off without another word, not interested in us and Bear trailing behind them.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized to him.

He grinned his shark smile. “Oh, this is nothing. My little ones, they would have blown up this place with their energy.”

“Geez,” I joked. “Don’t bring them here. Take them to Nico’s place.”

All of us laughed and he took off after the children.

“I am so tired,” Grace pronounced. “It’s like they are on steroids.”

I chuckled. “I’m pretty sure Hannah and Arianna feed off each other’s energy. It is a never ending circle.” I turned to Nico’s mother. “Umm, I’m not sure if you know each other already-” I started and when all three women shook their heads, I continued, “This is Nico’s mom, Mrs. Morrelli.”

“Please call me Nancy,” she chimed in.

I smiled at her. Despite her level of alcohol consumption, I kind of liked her. “Nancy, this is Grace Vitale and Ella…

Ugh, what's your last name? I'm sorry, I can't keep track of all the names I've learned today."

Ella grinned. "I wonder why. We only showed up at your doorstep unannounced. It is Amatte."

I grinned. "That's right. The two girls, twins, that were just here are mine. Hannah and Arianna. And the boy is Grace's. Matteo."

"You have girls?" Nancy's head whipped in my direction. "They are your daughters?"

I nodded. "Yes."

A shadow crossed her face. "Keep them away from Nico's father. Okay?"

I frowned at that request, then glanced at Grace and Ella. They seemed just as confused.

Without a word, I nodded. It was an odd request, but I didn't like her husband, so I'd have no issues following her request.

"Okay, show me where you wacked your best friend upside his head?" Nancy asked, breaking the awkward moment.

"What?" Grace and Ella asked at the same time.

"I was giving Nancy a tour of the house," I explained. "And was going to show her where I threw tools at John."

"The guy that Nico went crazy over?" Isabella joined in with a grin on her face. "I have to hear this one. Do you ladies mind if I join you? Vasili is driving me crazy. He thinks I'm an invalid not a pregnant woman. I'm just about ready to throw something at him."

Giggling like school girls, I proceeded to give everyone a tour.

And hope bloomed in my chest. I could get along with these women and make lifelong friendships.

After the tour, the ladies found seating on the patio as Grace and Ella entertained them with stories of their antics while traveling through Europe; although I had to wonder how she convinced her husband to let her go away for that long with their son. He didn't seem the type to let her stray too far.

Glancing around, I was surprised to see John still around but also happy. He stood leaned against the deck rails, watching me. Heading his way, where he stood alone with a beer, I felt a pang of guilt. I haven’t been a good friend to him.

“Hey there stranger,” he greeted me with a smile, his face sporting the black eye that Nico gave him. It was enough to feed the guilt I felt. I rubbed my temple for a second, meeting his brown eyes.

He was a good guy, one of the best. He always has been. Even when girls chased him, he only wanted one.

After his father’s accident, his mother tried to run his company. After three years of watching her struggle, he quit college and helped with the company. And now, Nico Morrelli, my husband, was dismantling it brick by brick.

Maybe I could help with that.

“Hey,” I bumped my shoulder against him. Just like we used to do when we were kids.

“So you and Nico Morrelli, huh?” He watched for any hints of distress. There were plenty, but I kept them hidden. “How did that happen?” I shrugged my shoulders and he narrowed his eyes on me. “I know this look. When you shrug, pout your lips - it’s your stubborn look.”

I barked out a laugh. “I don’t have a stubborn look.”

He rolled his eyes and grinned at that. “Oh, yeah you do.”

I shoved him playfully. “Do. Not.”

“Just tell me one thing.”

“Sure.”

“Does it have anything to do with the bag?” This time I reacted, and it didn’t escape him. “Jesus Christ, Bianca.”

“Hush,” I warned him, glancing around. Nico stared daggers at us and I flinched. Nico’s eyes raked over my best friend and I as if evaluating whether he should beat John again. I didn’t like the look in his eyes. It was stone cold, not an ounce of friendliness in them. And it was all directed at John.

“Fuck, tell me he won’t go all nuts again,” John muttered. I sensed more than saw John stiffen next to me.

Even though Nico was straight across on the opposite side of the yard, the air tensed and it felt harder to breathe, despite the fresh breeze. He stood with Cassio, Luca, and Luciano at the edge of the yard, closer to the driveway, as if he was waiting for someone to arrive. His father stood a few feet away from him, talking to one of Morrelli’s bodyguards. Nico’s eyes darted to his father every so often but kept coming back to me.

I was happy that his father kept away from the house and me. He was a despicable old man.

“It will be okay,” I told him, hoping it was true. “Don’t say anything about the bag. I don’t want anyone knowing you knew about it.”

John’s eyes came to me. “William and I fucked up, not you.”

“It’s not about the fuck-up,” I spoke in a hushed tone. “Don’t think about it.”

He stiffened and the hurt in John’s eyes hit me square in the chest.

“Do you trust me so little?” His question took me by surprise.

When I got pregnant, I panicked about telling William. John picked up on the signals without me telling him and assured me it’d be okay. When I found out about my husband’s infidelity, John immediately knew something was wrong and was there for me. The only thing he never

learned was the revelation about my biological father. He attributed my shock and sadness to losing my father, which was true to a certain point.

But over the last sixteen months, I shut him out. I kept the near loss of my home to myself, worries about my mother under the mafia, or paying for the debt when those two took the bag of money. He had enough of his own worries and didn't need mine. But unintentionally, I have hurt him.

John's attention on me, and a hurt in his eyes, clearly told me that whatever I said next could break our friendship forever.

"I'm sorry," I muttered. "I'm sorry for what happened earlier, I'm sorry for not calling, and I'm really sorry for keeping my distance over the last year. It sounds cliché but it was me not you."

He still stood stiffly, my heart thundered with the worry that I have forever damaged our friendship.

"I want to be there for you," he grumbled. "You are always there for me."

"I wasn't there with you over the last year while your company was being dismantled." My voice was full of regret. The fact that we both knew it was now my new husband that did it, probably made it worse.

"But you worried about me. You are too good, Bee," he said, shaking his head. "You try to fix everything for everyone but yourself. I just hope this time you didn't bite off more than you can chew."

We both knew he was talking about Nico.

"I love you no matter what, Bee," he continued and my chest warmed at his admission. "I'll always be here for you. I hope you know that."

I took a step to hug him, but his next words stopped me.

"Don't hug me," he mumbled. "I love you and we'll always be friends. But right now, your husband is glaring at me, probably contemplating how to murder me."

I turned my head and John was right. Nico didn’t look too pleased. That man had to work on his jealousy issues. I waved at him and offered him a big smile, then gave him a thumbs up.

Turning my attention to my best friend, I wrapped my hands around me.

“I love you too,” I told him. “But you gotta stop calling me Bee.”

He grinned. “Never!”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

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BIANCA

The party turned out better than I hoped. Definitely better than it started.

It was mid-afternoon and Nico's friends took turns getting to know me and dancing with me. When Cassio and Luca danced with me, Nico seemed at ease and trusting. Same with Luciano and Vasili. The latter two preferred dancing with their wives, which was fine by me. Vasili Nikolaev was scary, his brother Alexei even scarier. Sasha Nikolaev was somehow lighter, despite his striking resemblance to his brothers.

Nico didn't care to see me dancing with Sasha. So I avoided him. There was no sense in agitating the man. Basically, I came to the conclusion he was fine when I danced with the married men, excluding his father, which I was perfectly fine with, Cassio, and Luca. The other men were off limits.

Nico's eyes on me felt like a tingle on the back of my neck. As if he was guarding me. The party was mostly contained to the outside. The girls and Matteo were in and out, sticking to the side of the house with the beach and the playground. Bear was constantly with them and ensured the children never came close to Nico's father. I felt it was

by design that Nico insisted the party area be set up on the opposite side.

By now, I was able to relax. I got to know Nico's friends. I seemed to gravitate to Luciano and Massimo the most. Maybe because they were married and clearly crazy about their wives. And the ladies were usually there by their men. Though I liked Cassio a lot too. But his last name was what kept me cautious.

Right now, I sat with John, Luciano, Massimo, and the ladies. I glanced around, searching for Nico, surprised not to see him.

"Where is Nico?" I questioned.

"He and Cassio had to talk," Luciano answered. I raised my eyebrow, waiting but he never expanded. *Weird!*

"I'd kill for a scoop of Italian ice cream now," Grace muttered. She talked about an ice cream craving for the past ten minutes. She revealed she was pregnant and her cravings already started though she wasn't far along.

"You can try my homemade ice cream," I offered. "It is in the freezer in the garage. Just don't let the girls see it. Otherwise, they'll eat it all and then complain how sick they are. It is pretty rich."

"You make your own ice cream?" Awe was evident in her voice and her face.

I shrugged. "When I'm worried or stressed, I cook, bake, and make ice cream."

"Geez, wish I had that problem," she muttered. Her eyes darted behind me, and I followed her gaze.

Nico's father was right behind me, Nancy clearly unhappy by his side. I stood up and turned around to face them.

"Ahhh, my new daughter," he drawled, a menacing smirk on his lips. I noted Nancy flinch at his title for me. He didn't seem drunk, but I could smell alcohol on him. I was about to turn around when he took me by the arm and forced me to look at him.

“Excuse me,” I said, trying to remove myself from his hold, his fingers digging into my flesh.

Luciano came up beside me. “Let her go,” he said, his tone hard. These mobsters would be the death of me. “Or you’ll end up flat on your face.”

“You know he married you just for revenge,” his father said.

I blinked in confusion and my eyes traveled to his wife. There was sorrow in her eyes, and I wasn’t entirely sure whether it was for me, herself, or someone different.

I shook my head. “What do you mean?” My own voice sounded strange to me.

“Dominic,” Nancy warned her husband, but he didn’t even look her way.

Nico’s father smirked, a cruel smile on his face.

“He’s using you against him,” he drawled with an ugly smile. “We all know about your mother. You are a way to get to him.”

His hold on me grew tighter, hurting. But it didn’t compare to the pain in my chest. I searched out Nico with my gaze but couldn’t find him. Both he and Cassio were still nowhere in sight.

“You fucking let her go, or I’ll shoot you,” Luciano growled. “And your son will bury you alive.”

He let go of me so suddenly that I stumbled backwards. Luciano caught me before I could stumble right onto my butt.

A rowdy laughter had us all turning our heads and my heart froze.

“And here is the King,” Mr. Morrelli hummed, as I steadied myself on my feet, my heart stuck in my throat. “Let’s go, Nancy.”

Luciano growled next to me and pulled out his gun

Mr. Morrelli left without waiting for Nico’s mother, but she didn’t move from her spot. Instead, she called out, “I’m staying.”

He shrugged, venom in his eyes. “Suit yourself.”

Luciano took a step away from me but still lingered close while I stood, staring after Nico’s father and the man I have feared the most.

The old Morrelli was forgotten; I couldn’t look away from the incoming guests.

Benito King.

With my mother. And a small army of guards surrounding them. His bodyguards didn’t even bother concealing their weapons and I prayed this wouldn’t turn into a bloody wedding.

My eyes sought out my mother’s blue depths, but she avoided locking our gazes. She looked beautiful, but the aura of sadness and emptiness around her shattered me. Another event she was forced to miss. Her sacrifices kept piling up.

Because of him. The hatred burned deep inside me, threatening to swallow me whole. I have never been a violent person, but I wanted to see this vile man tortured and see him suffer.

Wrapping my hands around me, as if trying to protect myself, I watched my mother on Benito King’s arm. She was dying on the inside every single day. My heart thundered and the ball in my throat made it hard to breathe. How did they even get here? I knew my mother wouldn’t have brought Benito King, regardless of how desperately she wanted to see me married.

My ears buzzed, black dots swam in my vision.

“Bianca, are you alright?” Someone’s hand shook me out of my stupor. I turned my head to find Isabella shaking my arm. “You look like you are about to faint.”

Someone else chimed in, chuckling softly. “The ceremony is all done. Party is almost done and went without a glitch. For the most part. Breathe easily.” I couldn’t place the voice or who it belonged to. “Wedding night is next.”

“Tesoro,” Luciano growled. “You, Ella and the kids need to go inside. Now!”

“Oh my God,” Ella’s voice penetrated through my terror. I swore everything was happening in slow motion. “Benito King is here. That fucking bastard is here with an army.” She whimpered, fear in her voice reflecting my own.

“Luciano-” Grace’s voice held a note of panic too. “Why is he here?”

Luca and Massimo had their guns pulled out, and the Nikolaev men followed suit. Vasili put his wife behind his big body and the whole time, I watched the entire scene with the frozen terror, unable to move or say a damn thing.

All I could taste and feel was fear. Bitterness and fear at seeing my mother for the first time in six years and still not being able to save her. Or our family.

“Do you believe the nerve of that bastard?” Grace hissed. “He should be shot on the spot.”

“Tesoro, take the women and children in the house,” Luciano ordered again, his whole body tense.

I turned to the redheaded woman next to me. “Who?” My voice sounded distant, strange, detached. “Who should be shot?”

“Benito King. He kidnapped Ella and I only a few weeks ago.”

Bum-bum. Bum-bum. Bum-bum.

“He kidnapped you too?” I rasped my question.

Luciano’s head snapped to me, eying me funny, like maybe I was mentally unstable. How do I explain my mother was right there, and Benito was forcing her to stay because of some fucked up agreement? And my biological dad was that unstable, crazy, and cruel bastard? Vasili and Isabella Nikolaev stood there, tense and watching the entire scene with Sasha.

My breathing constricted; my lungs couldn’t get enough oxygen. I’d have a heart attack. Any second now. Maybe if I passed out, I’d escape his notice.

Arianna and Hannah found their way over to us with Matteo, Bear watching them like a hawk. All three kids giggled wild and happy, carefree smiles on their faces. Three of them were already best friends, wide grins on their happy faces.

Kids have the worst timing. The conclusion screamed in my brain. *The worst fucking timing.*

Bear let out several curses as he took the children, trying not to panic them but stir them away from the tense situation with guns pulled out.

My heartbeat stopped, a terrified realization that if Benito King saw my girls, he might demand them now.

I lifted my eyes, and I didn't need a mirror to know that desperation and devastation reflected there. I felt it in every cell of my body.

"Mommy, look what Matteo did," Arianna exclaimed, while my heart thundered in my throat. Searching out my mother and Benito, I saw them slowly walking our way. There were at least ten bodyguards behind two of them, another few on each side surrounding them, and probably more roaming around. The gun holster on Benito and his guards were clearly visible, even from here and my mom's face had a frozen smile plastered on it, all her emotions hidden.

This is bad.

I swallowed hard. "B-Bear, you think maybe you could take Matteo and my girls into the house," I rasped, my voice uneven while my ears rang. My hands visibly shook, so I gripped the material of my wedding dress, trying hard to hide them. I pleaded silently with my eyes. "Please," I breathed out.

He was already doing it but the children found the worst time to want to stay with us.

"Tesoro, hurry up and go inside with Massimo." Grace's husband urged her, his voice firm. "Massimo, pick a room without doors and windows. Lock it."

If Benito kidnapped Ella and Grace, Luciano understood the danger. Anywhere Benito went, misery and death followed.

Isabella, Massimo, and Ella quickly took children, each lifting one kid into their arms and scurrying along into the house, Bear and two other guards having their backs.

Thankfully, my girls didn't protest and went along without a complaint. They were enamored with Matteo, like a shiny new toy, and would follow him wherever he went for a foreseeable future.

"You should come with us too," Nancy, Nico's mom, chimed in, her voice low. "You don't want to meet that man. He's dangerous."

I returned my gaze to Benito and my mom who were slowly making their way. God, if she only knew how right she was.

"I can't," I muttered. "That's my mom." I heard a gasp, but kept my eyes locked on the couple coming my way. "Just keep the kids away, so he doesn't see them."

"Go," Luciano told Mrs. Morrelli. "I have Bianca. More men are coming too." I heard shuffling as she hurried out of here. Luciano stepped closer to me, his voice low as he said, "It will be okay, Bianca. Nico and Cassio are just minutes away."

Throwing a brief glance his way, I smiled shakily. I never expected to see Benito and my mom as guests at my wedding. And one that was put together so last minute. They must have been invited.

The words of Nico's father rang in my ears. *He married you just for revenge*.

"I should have paid attention to the guest list, huh?" I tried to joke, turning my head in the direction of the incoming ticking bomb.

"Assholes always find a way in," he muttered under his breath, and there was no mistaking that he disliked Benito.

After all, he kidnapped his wife. Would Luciano dislike me if he knew I was Benito's daughter?

"Ahhh, here is the bride," Benito's voice was pleasant, though the gleam in his eyes wasn't.

I didn't answer. My mother's blue eyes seemed tired, sad, and dead. Profound sorrow tasted salty and bitter on my tongue. Like blood, that I knew one day would spill.

Where Benito King goes, blood and death always follows. My grandmother's voice carried on the breeze, warning me of the incoming danger.

"You must be Bianca Carter," he drawled, since I remained quiet. He grabbed my hand into his and placed a kiss on the top of it. I never understood the true meaning of a creep until that very moment. Not even Nico's father compared. This man was giving me all kinds of creepy feelings. And he was my biological dad.

Fuck, no! It can't be. I felt nothing towards him, except disgust and hate. I had never hated anything as much as I did him.

"Or should I call you Bianca Catalano?" he added, a knowing look in his eyes. I tugged on my hand, but he held it firmly in his grip, his clammy hands making my skin crawl.

"You can call her Bianca Morrelli," Nico's tone, sharp and hard, sounded beside me and my head whipped in its direction. He snatched my hand out of Benito's grip. My husband's face was a cold, unmoving mask.

The man next to me was the ruthless mobster that the mafia world knew him as. Cassio and Luca King stood on the other side of my husband, surprising me. It almost felt like this was us versus them. I was surprised to see Cassio and Luca not standing next to their father, but then Nico's words rang in my ears, hinting at the cruelty they endured under their father.

Surrounded by all the mobsters, I felt safer with Nico and his friends than ever before. Though I wasn't sure if I

should feel safe around any of these men at all.

“Sofia, I thought your daughter had better taste in men,” Benito mocked. My mother’s face never changed, no expression passed it. Except for a little glimmer in her eyes. Her hair was red and though it looked good on her, I liked her better in her natural dirty blonde curls. She looked too pale, the vibrant red in her hair combined with her dark blue dress making her look washed out.

“Hello dear,” my mom leaned over and placed a light kiss on my cheek. “You look beautiful. Grandma and Dad would be so proud to see you today. Though you lost some weight.”

Her voice was as soft as I remembered it. It had been six years since I’ve seen her, and it hurt so damn much to see the pain in her eyes. It might not be evident to anyone else, but I saw it clear as day. She might not be that old, but her eyes were ancient.

“Mom,” I breathed out, my voice cracking with the feelings I tried to keep at bay. “I-”

Her hand came up to cup my cheek, her eyes meeting mine. “It’s okay,” she spoke softly. She watched me with love and sadness, shredding my heart to pieces. “Greece is nice this time of year, don’t you think?”

A sharp inhale took my lungs. It was our code. It was time to run. Did Benito find out I was his? The girls and I were in danger; we had to disappear. Except I was stuck. All my mother’s sacrifice was for nothing because I fucking walked into Nico, because I spent stolen money.

He said he would protect me, my mind whispered*.*

But could he? Could he protect my girls and I against someone so evil and ruthless as my mother’s lover? Owner. Jailer.

“Yes, the skies are blue,” I choked out, my voice barely audible. “And the seas are stormy.”

The tension was high around us; you could cut it with a knife. Nico and his friends stood close by, every single one

of them with their holsters open for an easy reach. Luciano and Luca had their guns out already. Benito's guards were ready to draw weapons too.

"What fucking rubbish about Greece is that?" Benito spat out, but I never looked away from Mom, committing her image to my memory. I could count on both hands the times I've seen my mom in my entire life. I barely had any pictures of her to keep with me. Yet, somehow, I felt connected to her on the basic level.

Mom never looked away from me. "Greece was on Bianca's bucket list. Wasn't it, darling?"

I nodded. It was goodbye. I wanted her to come with me, if I even succeeded in escaping Nico. With the guards he assigned on me, it was not very likely.

"Dear, I'd like to get together for coffee soon," she suggested. My mother hated coffee. "Maybe in two weeks. I'll text you the date so we can find somewhere to meet up." My heart raced frantically, my heart stuck in my throat. "Will that be okay?"

"Yes," I mouthed, my voice barely audible. I drank in her face, memorizing every single line on her face. My grandma and Dad ensured I knew I was loved by my mother, regardless that I rarely saw her. When I was little, I wondered why my mom wasn't around and slowly as I got older, my grandma would tell me more and more. The only thing she kept from me was my father's identity. She left me to believe the man who raised me was in fact my father.

"Nico, I'd congratulate you on your marriage," Benito said, a cruel gleam in his eyes. "But I can already tell your wife won't hang around for long. There are other plans meant for her."

I looked confused between Mom and Benito. "What do you mean?" I asked.

Benito just chuckled, not bothering to answer me.

The wind swept through and my mom's auburn colored hair fluttered around her. That was when I saw it. Purple

fingerprints on her neck. Someone choked her so hard, there were blueish purple fingerprints on her pale skin.

I glared at Benito, and a growl came out of my throat. I had the insane urge to scream, place my hands around his neck, and choke the life out of him. At that moment, I actually thought I could do it and wouldn't lose any sleep if I watched light leave his eyes as I killed him.

Stepping forward, I raised my hand, ready to hit him. I didn't think about it, I just acted.

"You son of a-" I spat but my mom cut in between me and Benito, stopping me from hitting the man.

"Honey, it's okay," my mom quickly said.

"No, it's not." My voice raised with each second, my heart racing. The only thing I felt was all-consuming fury. "He hurt you."

"Bianca," she warned, blocking Benito from my view.

Benito laughed. "You'll get used to it, Bianca," he chuckled darkly. "Your husband does much worse."

My temper flared, my ears thundered, and everything buzzed. Everything and everyone faded. The only thing I could focus on was the rage and the need to hurt this man. Red rage overcame me, feeding the adrenaline and I wouldn't care if an MMA fighter wanted to fight me. I wanted to hit and hurt, make someone bleed.

"Mom, move," I ordered through clenched teeth, side stepping her. My hands curled into fists, "You fucking son-of-"

I swung my hand, ready to claw at him and make him hurt. Just as he hurt my mother. He stepped back and I missed, my hand flying through the air.

"Bianca," Nico warned softly and grabbed my waist with his left hand, holding me back while I fisted his forearm around my front.

"Let go," I hissed, mad with rage.

"Bianca!" My mother's voice shattered through the red rage. "I love you, but I won't let you hurt him."

I blinked my eyes, frustrated tears replacing the rage that I couldn't act on. I wanted to shout, scream and curse at the top of my lungs. Inhaling deeply, I realized my feet were dangling off the ground. Nico lifted me up, like some doll, while I went into full attack mode.

"I'm fine," I muttered, exhaling. "I'm fine. Put me down."

He loosened his grip and my back slid down his body, but he didn't let go.

Like my outburst didn't just happen, my mother murmured softly, "I always thought Greece is a good bucket list choice."

Greece would be an unachievable dream. With Benito and Nico on my tail, it would be a daily run for the rest of my girls' lives.

Tears stung my eyes. She was so beautiful, a much better person than I ever was, why couldn't she get a break! I wanted her with me; I didn't have her growing up, but I wanted her around as I was growing old. I wanted to see her rocking on a porch, reading or whatever it was she liked to do. I didn't even know.

She cupped my cheek. With a silent nod, the message clear in her eyes, and the last kiss, she turned to Benito.

"Let's go, Benito," she said in an even voice. "You came to do what you set out to do."

She strode away from him without a backward glance. Benito threw me a look and grinned. He actually grinned at me.

"I am proud of you, Bianca," he purred. "Unlike your mother, you have some fire in you." I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists, fighting the urge not to jump on him and start punching him. Over and over again, until his face turned bloody and swollen. By the cruel smirk on his evil face, he knew it too.

And then he turned around and left, catching up to my mother, while I watched after them in confusion.

Frustration crawled up my spine, and I whipped around. My eyes traveled over Cassio and Luca King, then Luciano and ended with my husband. There was something going on between these guys and Benito King. And now I got pulled into it.

He married you just for revenge, the words of Nico's father rang in my ears.

My blood boiled, the frustration at feeling so weak and disposable in this mob world making me choke with rage.

"This is all your fault," I hissed, shoving a finger into Nico's chest. I was furious. Locking my eyes with all his friends. "All of you! You think you can use and dispose of people as it suits you. You are no better than him."

I lifted on my toes and got into Nico's face. "And you-" I hissed, searching for a word. "You are a manipulative asshole. This fucking contract marriage is over," I spat out. *He married you just for revenge.* "You can take that fucking money that I spent and shove it up your ass. In fact, I'll shove it down your throat so you can choke on it."

Nico's gray gaze flashed with something, but I was too far gone to keep my reason or be smart.

"You belong to me, Bianca." His voice was threatening. Low. Cold. Possessive. "You are mine for life. You run, I'll hunt. You hide, I'll turn over every rock until I have you. There is nowhere you can hide that I won't find you."

"But you said two years." I shook my head in disbelief, swallowing hard. He tricked me. He lied to me. He manipulated me.

He grinned, but it was frightening. Threatening. "Like I said, you belong to me. My wife."

"But the terms-" Oh my God. Did I get myself into the same situation as my mother?

"Why?" I asked, my voice rising. I was starting to get pissed off. "It's not the money. It can't be; it is a blip in your bank account."

"Nobody steals from me."

“You have a billion dollar empire, but you’ll hassle me for three hundred thousand and sentence me to lifelong misery. You want to know what I used the fucking money for? I spent every goddamn dime chasing some fucking non-existent cure that would save William’s life.” I said through clenched teeth. I knew this was neither time nor place, but now that words were coming out, I couldn’t stop them. “And don’t give me your bullshit lie about six hundred thousand. It was three, I can count, thank you very much!” I narrowed my eyes on him, my finger poking him over and over again against his hard chest. “And that money probably came back to you, since you seem to have everyone in this state on your payroll. Even poor William! You people have to ruin everything good, don’t you?”

Anger reflecting my own flashed in Nico’s eyes. He took another step, his body flushed with mine, his gun holster too close for comfort. He towered over me.

“If William was so good, why did he lie?” He growled low, anger rolling off him. “And in case you are wondering where that other three hundred thousand went, Bianca, it went to his mistress.”

The words felt like a physical slap in my face. Both my cheeks burned, my throat constricted.

“You lie!” It couldn’t be the truth. William said it was only a short affair, two weeks. “He wouldn’t-”

I wouldn’t go there now. It wasn’t as if it mattered now. I couldn’t do anything about it. Hardening my heart, I glared at all of them.

“You better sleep with your eyes open because if something happens to my mother, it is on you, and I’ll kill you.” The childish part of me wanted to throw a fit. Maybe grab the wedding cake and shove it onto the floor. “And the rest of you,” I huffed, narrowing my eyes on them. “You breathe wrong and I’ll… I’ll-” Damn it, what could I do? “I’ll kill you.”

Luciano threw his head back and laughed. I blinked in confusion at his reaction. It wasn't what I expected. "Damn, this sounds like déjà vu," he said. "I think my wife threatened me in the same way a few weeks ago."

I blew a frustrated breath. "You don't know what you've done," I accused them all.

"Hold on," Luca cut in, his eyebrows raised. "Your mother is Benito's whore, and you are blaming this on us?" Luca's voice challenged. "She came to your wedding with him, not us."

I took two steps his way and my hand flew through the air, slapping him hard across the face.

"Don't talk about my mother like that."

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Chapter Twenty-Six

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NICO

Luca's cheek held my wife's handprint, his eyes darkened in anger, and he took a threatening step towards her. Great, they didn't even know they were related, and they were already arguing like siblings.

"Luca," I growled, taking a step towards him. "Don't touch my wife."

He wouldn't hit her, but he wasn't beyond scaring the living daylights out of her. The start of this marriage didn't go according to plan. That was putting it mildly. I wasn't surprised to see Benito show up, though I was surprised to see how fast he showed up. And with Bianca's mother!

At least he was late with intercepting the marriage. Benito wasn't stupid and I was sure he did his homework. Though I had to wonder whether he came because my father told him about the wedding today or because Jenna sent him a message before Leonardo got to her so his goal was to kidnap Bianca and force her to Vladimir.

My father was weak and stupid. Always trying to get in the bed with sharks, but he didn't know how to swim. I expected my father to call Benito and it made me itch to just end him. Once and for all! It infuriated me to think of so many goddamn traitors. My own damn father! Fucking Jenna Palermo!

Thank God I never fucked that bitch.

Jenna didn't know why I wanted William on my payroll. So that two-faced bitch couldn't have told Benito my reasons behind it. But he'd learn soon enough.

Bianca stood in front of me, her cheeks red and fury burning in her eyes. My wife had a temper. A really bad one, from the looks of it. I rarely lost my temper, but she seemed to succeed in edging me on, causing me to lose my reason.

"Go in the house, Bianca," I ordered her.

"Fuck you, asshole," she rebelled back, fury in her dark eyes. Fuck, even like that she turned me on. "Just because I said *I do* a few hours ago, doesn't mean I'll do what you say."

Sasha Nikolaev chuckled. "Damn, I like this woman." He had a wide grin on his face. "Bianca, if you need someone to shoot Nico or anyone else, I'm your man."

Bianca rolled her eyes at him, annoyed expression on her face.

"You'd probably charge me an arm and a leg. I already had to marry one asshole because I owed him money. I don't need any more of that shit."

Sasha winked at her. "I'd do it for free."

"Well, in that case, let me get a list together," she replied sweetly to him, shooting glares my way. "I'll text it to you."

My wife knew just what to say to get me all fired up. I was barely keeping a lid on my temper. And Sasha wasn't helping, sending the jealousy through my veins.

"Sure thing, beautiful," Sasha purred and a growl came from my throat.

Bianca's eyes narrowed, as if challenging me to say anything about her getting a phone number from another man.

"Sasha, shut the fuck up," Vasili warned his brother. Sasha had a damn knack for grating people when they

were at their worst.

“We are just exchanging numbers,” Sasha said with a grin. “Let me write down my personal cell-”

And I lost my shit. My hand wrapped around Sasha’s neck, lifting him off the ground. The fucking dude wasn’t a small guy either.

“She’s my wife,” I gritted between my teeth. “You won’t be texting with her.”

Bianca’s small fists hit my back. “Put him down, you brute.”

I ignored her and squeezed harder. Her defending him made me even more pissed off.

“Alexei, won’t you help your brother?” Isabella Nikolaev muttered.

“Bella, I told you to remain inside,” Vasili scolded her. She must have been worried about her husband and found her way back out much to his dismay. What was it with these women that just didn’t listen?

I didn’t want to end my wedding day on an even shittier note than it started, but if I have to, I’d fucking fight them all. Nobody would flirt or touch my wife. Otherwise, we’d have a bloody wedding day.

“Alexei!” Isabella scolded.

“Nah, I’m good,” Alexei replied. “This is kind of fun.”

“Raphael, please help Sasha,” Isabella begged.

“If you successfully kill Nico, you can have all his money,” Bianca chimed in, her little fists on my back felt like a massage.

“Don’t even think about it, Raphael,” I told him, then narrowed my eyes on the pissed off beauty in front of me. “We just got married, wife, and already contemplating killing me? How you wound me,” I mocked and she scoffed. “Can you move to the left and hit the spot there, Cara Mia? I love the rough massage.”

She immediately stopped and pulled her hands away from me. I turned my head her way, needing to see her. Her

hurt expression hit me straight in my chest. It didn't take a genius to know today wasn't the best day of her life. Not that I expected it to be but it turned out even worse.

"How could you?" she asked.

"How could I what?" I replied, though I had a suspicion I knew.

"You invited my mother and that man?" she rasped. "You knew she was Benito's-" She couldn't finish the sentence. "Your dad said something about revenge. Is that it?"

I should have known my father would try to stir some shit.

"I didn't invite your mother nor Benito King," I told her, and it wasn't a lie. "I did suspect they'd come."

"How?"

"Jenna Palermo alerted him," I confessed, locking eyes with her. It was important to me that she believed me, at least in this. "When you told me about her and William, I started digging and found out she was the connection that fed Benito information. About you and William. It was the reason I moved up the wedding."

Disappointment shone in her eyes, and I knew without a doubt, she was thinking about our earlier conversation. No more surprises. But this was another one.

"You are wrong on so many levels," she mustered sadly "I'm going in the house."

She turned around, not sparing me nor Sasha another glance, while he still hung up in the air, gripping at my hand.

I let go of him and he landed on his feet, gasping for air.

Isabella shook her head, giving us all a glare. I guess she wasn't happy nobody would step in to save her brother-in-law. It was my wedding after all; the groom was always right on his wedding day. Right?

My wife would disagree. I fucked up big time on my wedding day.

“Wait, Bianca. I’ll come with you,” Isabella called after her. My wife turned and waited for Isabella. The latter was pregnant so when they resumed walking, Bianca slowed down her pace. That was her - thoughtful and caring. For Christ’s sake, she even apologized to Bear for calling him scary.

“I knew you’d listen eventually,” I told my wife. She never even turned around, just flipped me the bird over her head.

“Well, I got to say, Nico,” Luciano drawled. “Your wedding day went even better than mine.”

“Fuck off,” I muttered. “Asshole.”

“Your wife assigned that name to you,” Luca mumbled, rubbing his cheek. “Jesus, Nico. Who in the fuck did you marry?”

“Your sister,” I told him.

The silence followed, everyone debating whether I was joking or not.

“I’m not sure if I should laugh or not,” Vasili ended up breaking the silence. “Was it a joke or not? Or is it an inside joke?”

“It’s not a joke,” I answered, locking eyes with Cassio and Luca. Their eyes, so similar in color, just regarded me with leery calmness.

“Tell me you are joking,” Cassio’s voice sounded strained.

“I’m not.”

Another heartbeat of silence.

“Her mother is not our mother,” Luca justified, the wheels turning in his head. “We would fucking know. And she is not Benito’s…” His voice trailed off, realization hitting him. “No fucking way.” Luca held my gaze as the puzzle came into place. “No fucking way,” he hissed, shaking his head. “He didn’t look at her as his daughter. If she was his daughter, it wouldn’t have mattered that you married her. He’d have dragged her out of here. His men

would have started a war right here. We'd be having a blood bath."

"Nico, explain," Cassio growled. He was pissed. I didn't blame him. Shit, maybe today would turn into a bloody wedding after all, and Bianca would get her wish. She'd be a widow before I even got a taste of her.

"Damn it, Nico," Cassio roared when I didn't answer. "What the fuck? Explain!"

"I'll start with this," I told him in a cold voice. "You try to take her, and we'll have a war." Our eyes locked, the words I had just spoken looming over. Nobody dared to chime in, not even Sasha with his dumb comments. "She is mine, Cassio. My wife. And I intend to keep her as my wife."

"She's my sister," Cassio said, pissed off.

"That you didn't know about," I reminded him.

"Just fucking explain," Luca interrupted the anger brewing. "The suspense is killing me."

"Bianca's mother got wrapped up with Benito twenty-six years ago," I told them both, while everyone listened in suspense like it was some damn soap opera. "She was engaged to be married to someone else. Obviously, she didn't marry him. She had a baby not long after and left the baby with her ex-fiancé and her mother. Somehow Benito believed it was her ex-boyfriend's baby. She rarely came around. That pretty much sums it up."

"That can't be right," Alexei chimed in, a frown on his tattooed face. It didn't surprise me to see Bianca gawking at the dude, though it made me jealous. The ink covering his skin always drew stares. "Those two seemed close. Like they were in sync."

"My sources tell me she visited her daughter less than a handful of times since she was born," I told him.

"What makes you think her father is not her ex-fiancé?" Cassio asked. "Does her birth certificate indicate Benito as the father?"

This was the kicker. If Bianca wouldn't have gotten sick as a child, nobody would have ever known.

"No, Benito isn't listed as a father. Ten years ago, Bianca got sick and needed a blood transfusion. She is AB negative," I explained. "Neither her mother nor the father listed on her birth certificate are that blood type."

"Benito is that blood type," Cassio rasped. "So am I."

I nodded.

"Well, fuck me," Luca muttered. "I'm guessing she got the transfusion. Did Benito give it to her?"

"Not directly. Her mother bribed a group of doctors to falsify that she herself needed a transfusion. Benito donated blood for his favorite mistress and Sofia ensured her daughter got the needed blood."

When Nicoletta was brutally murdered, I started digging through everything and anything. I used my vast resources to look into every single person Benito had contact with, including his mistresses. It was how I found out about Bianca and started planning my revenge, but I kept those words for myself.

"Does Bianca know?" Cassio glanced towards the house where the women sat on the patio. My mother, Isabella, Grace, and Ella were laughing at something Bianca was telling them, while the kids ran around the yard. It pleased me to see my mother sitting next to Bianca, smiling and somewhat sober. She was in better condition today than I've seen her in a very long time.

"I don't think so," I told him. Like a magnet, my eyes went back to Bianca and found her watching me. The moment our eyes met, she narrowed her eyes, then turned her head. Yes, my wife and I would be a volcano together.

"How long have you known, Nico?" Cassio asked. I knew my admission would piss him off.

"A while."

"How long?"

"Almost three years."

The silence that followed was condemning. It was bad, the fury rolled off from him and Luca in waves.

“And revenge? Your sister?” Cassio growled. “Benito destroyed your sister, so you’ll destroy mine.”

I stood at my full height. Cassio and I were the same height. We had never been on disagreeing terms, but there was a first time for everything. He’d be a strong opponent, but I’d be damned if I’d lose now that I got Bianca.

“Bianca will never meet the same fate as Nicolette,” I bit out. “It’s offensive, you'd even insinuate.” Resentment rose in my chest and my jaw tensed, almost to the point of pain. “She might be your sister, but she is my wife now. So don’t fuck with me or her.”

Cassio’s nostrils flared. His eyes traveled to where I knew Bianca sat there back to me. We were both angry and lost a lot because of Benito. But I had no intention of losing her. To any King member.

“You couldn’t find the right time to tell me?” Cassio’s voice was dangerously low.

I had plenty of opportunities to tell him, but I didn’t. It was a conscious decision because my need to avenge Nicoletta was stronger than my loyalty to Cassio. He didn’t know he had a sister, and I wanted to use Bianca against her father. Of course, everything kind of went sideways with her husband being sick and my cock zeroing in on the woman. If you asked my cock, she was the only woman on this earth. Fuck, I wanted her more than anything, and now she was my wife she’d remain so for the rest of my life.

Bianca was my destiny. Life has thrown her my way one too many times and I intended to keep her. I loved her strength, her softness and kindness. Heck, I even loved her temper. Truthfully, I loved every single thing about her.

“I gather you blackmailed her into marrying you,” Cassio continued.

“Stay the fuck out of my marriage,” I snarled. “She agreed to be my wife.”

Okay, that was stretching it a bit, but there was no need to point that out right now. I'd never give her up. She was mine. For life.

"What's this shit about the contract?" Luca chimed in.

"I made it up. I'm keeping her."

Luca shook his head. "Man, if she comes to me and wants to have you killed, you are dead. You are not forcing my sister into a lifelong imprisonment."

"I hate to take sides," Luciano interrupted. "But it didn't look like there was any forcing when they were sucking each other's lips in front of the priest."

Cassio growled, now that he realized I was devouring his sister.

"She's mine, Cassio," I told him. "I'll protect her. We'll work out our shit."

"How? Based on lies?"

"You are not exactly the epitome of truth," I reminded him. He was scheming to get the woman he wanted. The head of the Irish mafia would start a war if he knew Cassio's decoy plan.

"You hurt her," Cassio warned, "and I'm coming for you."

"Man, this is the best fucking wedding I've ever been to," Sasha blurted out, taking a gulp of his drink. "We should do this more often. Vasili's wedding was a fucking bore. But this… fuck, yeah! Invite me to all your weddings. Drama, suspense, threatening bride… it's the whole package without paying a subscription fee."

Sasha Nikolaev would be on my do not invite list going forward. He might be the best sniper to walk this earth, but his mouth was the worst.

"Forgive my brother," Vasili muttered. "He is stuck between his teenage years and twenties."

Luciano slapped me on the shoulder. "Welcome to the hellish bliss, Nico. Tonight will be interesting. Should Grace and I take the girls?"

Cassio and Luca growled, probably restraining themselves from attacking me. I knew the second they learned Bianca was their sister, they'd be overbearing and crowding her.

"Thanks, fucker," I told Luciano.

"I wish you told me she was my sister before I called her mother Benito's whore," Luca muttered. "She probably hates me now as much as she does you, Nico."

"She doesn't hate me," I snapped.

"Okaaay," Raphael rolled his eyes. "Lie to yourself, man. Bury your head in the sandbox."

"Jesus, Raphi," Sasha shoved him. "You are acting just as immature as your half-sister."

"Don't fucking call me that," Raphael told him, glaring at him. "Or I'll shoot you. And she's my sister. Your sister-in-law. Alexei's half-sister."

"Fuck. You. Raphael." Alexei spat. "When I kill you, you'll be her dead brother."

Yeah, the common theme on my wedding day was kill or be killed. I waited forty years for this.

"Babe," everyone's heads turned. Not sure why we all looked. There were only two men that were currently happily hitched. Grace and Isabella to their men. It was Grace calling Luciano. "Bianca invited us to stay here instead of driving back home tonight. Are you up for it?"

Luciano's eyes surveyed the place. It was exposed, but I had men watching the property like it was a military compound.

"It's safe," I told him. "I have the place surrounded. Men are watching from the bay too."

"Tell me you won't be spending your wedding night under the same roof as us," Luciano muttered, smirking. "There is only so close I want to be to you when you and your new bride-"

"Would you shut the fuck up?" Cassio stopped Luciano's comment. Bianca's brothers would take overprotective to

turbo mode.

Luciano chuckled, completely unfazed. “Nico, take your wife to your place, and we’ll meet you there tomorrow. Or you come here. Just please don’t fuck her here.”

“Didn’t I warn you to shut up?” Cassio hissed, his brows scrunched and his lips tightened.

“Have her invite us to stay too,” Luca muttered under his breath. “I barely talked to her daughters. I want to be a good uncle.”

“Me too,” Cassio added, taking a deep breath. He was a hothead, like Bianca. But he cooled off easily, just like his sister. “I’m probably better uncle material than Luca.”

I groaned.

Here we go.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

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BIANCA

As the evening came, so did the sweet cool breeze off the bay. The sound of the waves crashing against the shoreline in a rhythmic motion, and glowing moon rising over the water made for a beautiful, calm scenery. It helped my state of mind.

What have I got myself into?

Nico Morrelli… my husband, I thought wryly, *is a master manipulator and a liar*.

A hot, sexy liar that made my body melt under his gaze, but a liar nonetheless. He would be my sweetest demise. Or my most bitter one.

“You better?” John asked, sitting beside me while Nancy sat on the other side of me.

“Yes, all good.” It didn’t matter whether I was or not, the only thing that mattered was that I stayed focused and my girls were safe. Nancy was wrapped up in her discussion with Ella and Grace. Something about a place in Sicily, and I turned my head to John.

“John, how much money was in that bag?” Nico’s words rang in my ears on repeat. I couldn’t let it go. Did it matter at this point? No, probably not, but I had to know.

“Six hundred thousand.” There it was, my confirmation.

“How come when I went through it,” I asked, “there was only three hundred thousand in it?”

Silence ticked like a time bomb. I knew the answer and so did John. Nico was a liar, but he had no reason to lie about the money owed to him. He had his own agenda, but it wasn’t related to money. He didn’t need it.

“How could you let me believe he ended it?” I rasped.

His throat moved as he swallowed hard. “I didn’t find out until he got really sick. You were already out of your mind, and it seemed pointless to tell you.”

“How did you find out?”

“That woman, Jenna, called me to ask about you. I told her William was on his deathbed, and I threatened her that if she called again, I’d tell her husband.” My best friend and he kept such a secret from me. William lied to me, though when he told me it was over, I had a gut feeling he wasn’t telling me everything. I ignored it, coughing it up to my stress levels. Dad kept a big secret from me, and I didn’t want my imagination to assume secrets were being kept by my husband too. How did I miss so much?

What’s done is done. My father used to say that all the time. It seemed appropriate in this situation. After all, it wasn’t as if I could confront William. Yet it was hard to overlook the betrayal. So much deceit.

Our last week together, in the hospital, flashed in my mind - the memory heart wrenching and now tainted. Was any of it true?

“Bianca,” William’s voice was weak, the smell of the hospital overwhelming and a constant reminder of what was coming. “Don’t cry.”

Words stuck in my throat, invisible hands choking me, taking everything.

“Bianca, look at me.”

William’s voice was firm; it was the first time in weeks that I heard his voice so determined. Our eyes met, my heart hurting so bad, I was sure I had to be bleeding

somewhere on the inside. I could barely see his frail hand through tears in my eyes. It took all his strength to raise his arm, reaching for me. Taking his hand in my palm, I placed my cheek against it. "I had more than most men in their entire life… your love. You and the girls made me the happiest man. I'm dying a happy man."

A sob I had been trying so hard to hold back whimpered through my mouth and my lungs constricted. It was the first time we both acknowledged that he was dying. We lost the fight. Everything we tried failed. I didn't care any longer that he hadn't been faithful to me. I just needed him here. With me. With our girls.

"Please, William." I placed my forehead against his. I wasn't sure what I was pleading for. I wanted him to stay, but he had no say in it anymore. His strength was failing, his organs were failing. The doctors were amazed he was still holding on.

"Promise me," his loving face was a shadow of what it used to be. "Promise you'll move on. You deserve more."

I couldn't even think about moving on back then, but now I wondered whether he had moved on already. That was his last goodbye. He was gone forever the next day.

My eyes gravitated towards Nico. He knew William cheated. I meant my words to him yesterday. I didn't believe in cheating. Nico agreed, but now I wasn't sure what I believed or didn't believe. Not that it mattered. I wouldn't be around very long.

It would seem my new husband and I both had agendas. Yet his agenda could destroy me. Benito getting his hands on my girls or me would doom us. He had sucked the life out of my mother already; I refused to let him have more of our family.

And Nico… well, whatever the hell his agenda was, he could find another way to get revenge.

I had to be smart. Trusting him was out of the question.

Mom said she wanted to have coffee in a few weeks. That meant I only had a few weeks to run. Not much time to get my shit together. It would be harder with Nico and his guards around.

A marriage contract for two years. Yeah, right! I snickered in my head. His promises of protection… it was all bullshit. I must be the biggest idiot on this planet to have believed his word. The word of a fucking mobster.

That's okay though. I'd play along, until I found my window to take my girls and run. Hopefully, the opportunity came sooner rather than later. I had our passports tucked in a secret pocket inside my purse. It wasn't smart to go around with passports, but it became necessary. My grandmother insisted on that little act when I turned eighteen. She pulled my passport out of her own purse and handed it to me, requesting I keep it on me at all times. Just like my driver license, she'd said. I didn't know why until Dad's deathbed confession.

My eyes absorbed the leftover party. Grace, Ella, Nancy, and I hung around on the back patio. Most of the guests left. Luciano was still around, of course. Grace, Ella, Luciano, and Massimo would stay the night. Nancy was still here too. I was pissed off with her son, and she knew it, but both of us steered away from that topic. I decided I liked her very much, so we kept to neutral subjects. She didn't seem to want to go home so I offered her a room, if she wanted to spend the night.

Cassio and Luca still hung around, glancing my way every so often. Probably debating how to kill me for slapping Luca.

What. A. Fucking. Asshole.

I just couldn't get away from the King family. Albeit, I have to admit to myself that other than Luca's badmouthing my mother, I didn't mind those two. They were nothing like their father, but brothers or not, I

wouldn't allow either one of them to talk about my mother like that.

My mother had sacrificed herself for me.

A mistake.

One night with the wrong stranger.

A lifetime of regret.

She didn’t know about the debt owed to the King family - one belle every other generation. It wasn’t her generation to pay; it would have been her child’s. My debt to pay. But unfortunately, Grandma thought she was sparing my mother when she kept that secret. When Benito King saw her, he knew Sofia Catalano wasn’t part of the agreement. He knew exactly who she was, but he wanted her so he came up with a plan.

Mom and her fiancé had a fight, she went out with her girlfriends, got drunk, and ended up in Benito King’s bed. The consequences were dire and she paid for them every single day since. She ended up pregnant. Benito stalked her for weeks later, though she got back with Dad. That was when Benito King educated my mother on the debt that my family owed, every other generation. Our family owed Benito two more generations of belles. A girl to be owed to an agreement our stupid grandfather made. It was supposed to skip my mother. But my mother knowing she was pregnant, and an early blood test revealing the gender, she traded her own life for mine.

And here we were. This flip flop made one of my daughters part of the fucking agreement. We had no part in making the damn agreement, yet we had to pay for it. Those stupid men should start selling themselves and see how they like it.

The strung lights lit up the patio and entire backyard, giving it a soft glow. I guess Nico paying off the entire mortgage didn’t save the house. Not for my girls and me at least. Soon, we’d leave it all behind, and I had no idea how I’d ever explain it to my daughters.

“You have to share your ice cream recipe with me,” Grace’s voice startled me. “It tastes just like gelato in Italy.” She grinned, tilting her head Matteo’s way. “Trust me. Matteo is your judge, because the little guy refuses to eat American ice cream.” The kids’ happy faces were all smeared with ice cream. “I can’t believe you make ice cream from scratch.”

“Not all the time,” I admitted. “Like I said, when I mess around in the kitchen, it helps me relax and think.”

I stared out into the horizon, the breeze had picked up and the air smelled like the beginning of rain. There was something beautiful about watching a storm crawl up the bay with its dark cloud. So damn poetic right now because it mirrored my life. A consuming, thunderous, and dangerous future lay ahead of me, reflected in the dark clouds of the skies.

“God, this view,” I muttered to John absentmindedly, already preparing for the departure. “I will miss it.”

“You can always come back,” he said hopefully. “Visit or whatever. Maybe spend weekends here; I’d join you.” I scrunched my eyebrows at his words. Somehow, I didn’t think Nico would be open to me hanging out with my best friend. Not that it mattered what the hell Nico wanted. “When are you moving into his place?”

It was a fair question, a fair assumption, but I had no clue. The damn man announced we were getting married today, this morning. I had no idea what his plans were. Ideally, it would be leaving us here, but he said before that he wanted us to share a bedroom, a bed. Of course, he could have been lying. After all, he uttered quite a bit of those.

Hannah’s giggling sounded from the living room. I turned my head, hoping I could spot her form from here instead of having to hunt her down. That little girl would become a troublemaker.

I noticed the men were now inside too. Frowning, I wondered what was going on. Grace and Ella leaned to the side, glancing curiously into the living room. Nancy raised an eyebrow at me in a questioning look.

I shrugged my shoulders. “No clue what is going on.”

Grace and Ella stood up, heading inside.

“They are watching something on the television,” Ella explained.

Nancy and I followed behind them. I couldn’t see anything except for Luciano’s and Nico’s wide shoulders, while Cassio and Luca leaned against the opposite wall, watching whatever was on TV.

“What’s going on?” I questioned.

Luciano shifted his big body, opening the view and that’s when I saw it. I stopped dead in my tracks, in the middle of the living room, everybody forgotten.

My first wedding played on the big screen. The father-daughter dance part.

“The father requested a special dance with his daughter,” the announcer’s voice blasted through the television, and the tunes of Ray Charles’ “Hit the Road Jack” started. My dad’s big, happy grin as he wiggled his finger for me to join in.

I looked too young to be married. Clueless about what life was about to bring to our doorstep.

The younger version of me laughed, shaking my head, but he insisted. Dad was a bomb on the dance floor, he had his own groove, and we often danced when I was growing up to his favorite songs.

“No, Dad,” my voice sounded through the television, *“not in front of everyone.”*

My hands covered my face but he refused to let it go. *“Let’s show them how it’s done, Bee.”*

I shook my head, pleading on my face though I was smiling. It was my grandma that ushered me onto the floor, joining our dance.

“I’m never going to live this one down,” the younger version of me complained, though a wide smile played on my face. It was incredible how well the cameraman captured the moment. Dad and Grandma always made me happy.

Dad and I broke into our moves, all the childhood years spent dancing in our living room put to good use on the dance floor. Our hands moved up and down, left and right, both of us laughing. Grandma wasn’t far behind us, she just moved a bit slower.

“Oh, sí,” she announced laughing. *“I got the moves.”*

The guests both on the screen and in my living room chuckled. It was a bittersweet moment and my chest squeezed. I missed them so much. Life was simpler back then. Dad wasn’t happy that William and I decided to get married. He thought we were too young, he wasn’t good enough, but he supported me nonetheless. It was what made Dad the best father I could have ever wished for.

“Mom, how come you and Dad didn’t dance?” Hannah's question pulled me out of the TV moment. “You and Nico danced.”

William and I never had our husband and wife dance. He hated to dance and refused to do it, even for our wedding day. But my dad loved to dance, so he and John stepped in.

“Hmmm, he didn’t want to dance,” I told her. I was upset that he couldn’t bend for one dance, but no matter how much I begged, he wouldn’t do it. So my first dance was with my father. Now that I was older, somewhat wiser, maybe I wouldn’t have gone through with the wedding. He was my first love, but maybe we were better friends than lovers.

“You got some moves,” Luciano commended, and I rolled my eyes at him.

The Ray Charles' song ended and turned into the polar opposite style of the song. The beat of Sean Paul’s “Temperature” came on and Dad continued his dance

moves. John and I danced in sync in a rhythmic way and my dad mimicked us. Grandma held her hip, complaining it was painful to dance to such a vulgar song.

“Uncle John is dancing,” Arianna announced.

I threw a glance at John who stood next to me with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I got moves,” he told her.

“John, those are not moves,” I giggled, a little blast from the past releasing my tension. “There is probably a meme somewhere with the two of us as idiots.”

He tilted his head to the screen. “Three of us. I think your dad was killing our groove.”

A soft chuckle filled the room.

“How come our grandpa didn’t dance with your mom?” Hannah questioned. She could never grasp the concept of grandpa and grandma together since they never saw my mom. “Where was she?”

“She couldn’t come,” I mumbled. Mom couldn’t make it to the majority of things because of that bastard.

As I stared at the screen, the memories flooded back. Dad told me on his deathbed, he wasn’t my dad. Telling me my mother’s whole story.

“You look so young,” Nancy’s voice brought me back to the present. “And so happy.”

I was happy, despite William being a stubborn mule and refusing to dance with me.

“Were you even legal to drink yet when you got married?” Grace questioned.

I shook my head. I was barely shy of twenty-one. Tears glistened in my eyes as I watched my dad and I twirl around the dance floor, laughing. I felt Nico’s gaze and involuntarily lifted my eyes and my insides shuddered at the insanity in his eyes.

The scene on the tape halted and switched, the sounds of a boat coming through the television. Breaking our eye contact, I frowned at the scene. It was William’s and my

argument after our first boat ride together. He forgot to buy the lifejackets for the kids.

“Okay, that’s enough.” I strode to the TV.

“Hiding something?” Luca tried to joke but I wasn’t in the mood.

“No, but this is private.” Words came through the television, William and I arguing about safety and having lifejackets for the little ones on the boat before I clicked the television off.

“Did he end up getting the lifejackets?” Luca asked, since he caught the beginning of the argument recorded.

I exhaled, throwing a side glance at John.

“We got the wrong size,” John muttered. “And while shopping, William bought a golf cart at the store and insisted on driving it home. We stopped at the local pub on our way back. After a *few* beers, we continued back home and got pulled over by the cops. We ended up spending the night in jail. Bianca refused to come and bail us out.”

I shrugged. “I warned you.”

“You did. Well, this is my cue,” John announced. “I’m out.”

I was surprised he stayed this long, though happy. He was the only one from my side. Mary and her husband would be upset when I tell them we got married sooner than I told them. That would go over like tons of bricks.

“I’ll walk you out,” I told him, ignoring Nico’s threatening gaze. It wouldn’t do me any good to piss him off, nor did I want to edge him on about John so I added, “Nico, do you want to walk our guest out together?”

It sounded fake even to my own ears.

“No, please don’t,” John stopped both of us. “I know my way out. You still have your other guests.”

He didn’t wait for us but just gave me a quick peck on the cheek, nodded at Nico, waved to everyone else, gave my girls a hug and disappeared out the front door.

“I’m scared for you Nico,” Luca said after John left. “You can count on your wife not bailing you out of trouble. Can you keep out of trouble?”

“Maybe Bianca will straighten Nico up,” Cassio chuckled. “But if your husband gives you troubles, Bianca, you call me, and I’ll back you up. I’ll help you bury the body.”

Cassio gave Nico a pointed look, but my new husband didn’t seem worried at all. It felt like there was significance behind it.

My head turned towards those two, my eyes narrowing.

“Mom, Nico is not gonna die, right?” Arianna asked, making me forget about Cassio and Luca. There was honest-to-God concern on her face and her lower lip trembled. “I like Nico.”

“Of course not,” I told her, quickly, lowering myself to my knees and she walked into my arms. “Nobody is going to die.”

Arianna was my sensitive one. And when she was tired, tears flowed fast and easily.

“You like him too, right?” Hannah blurted. Kids always asked the most difficult question.

“Hmmm.” I left my answer vague, my eyes meeting him over my daughter’s head.

If only it was that simple.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

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NICO

It took my breath away seeing Bianca on the screen. My mother was right, she looked happy and young. There was no missing the love she shared with her father and grandmother.

Her young, carefree face shone with happiness as she danced uninhabited. It wasn't the first time I saw Bianca at that age. The first time I saw her was in one of my clubs, she couldn't have been more than nineteen at that time. She danced with John and several girlfriends. Our eyes connected for a fraction of a second, but even back then she took my breath away with her dazzling smile. Except, back then she was a stranger that had no business being wrapped up in my world. So, I just watched her from afar for a single night. Never in a million years did I think we'd cross paths again.

Then she was thrown my way. The daughter of my worst enemy. In my eyes, she was still the most beautiful woman in the world. She stirred something in me I had never felt for or from anyone else. Even when she bantered with me or was furious with me, there was something about her that I had never seen in anyone. Yes, there was attraction between us but also something unique, a rare treasure.

And I wouldn't discard it. I would have her and my revenge. Once Benito paid, I'd do everything in my power to make it up to her and focus on building a life with my wife. *Our family.*

It would take some work. Ever since the fiasco earlier, she built walls thick and sky-high around herself. The fragile trust was shattered into a million pieces. But I'd get it back; I'd use a bulldozer to knock those walls down.

For now, I'd focus on tonight.

"Girls, would you be okay if your mommy and I went to set up our new house while Matteo stays here with you?"

Bianca's head whipped my way, but she didn't say anything. We both knew the wedding night would happen. Whether the wedding was today or next week, this marriage was going to be consummated.

It was a little past six, and I intended to make full use of our night.

"We need adults to watch us," Hannah replied, her eyes serious.

"I'm glad you said that," I told her seriously. "Luciano, Grace, Ella, Massimo, Luca, and Cassio will stay here with you."

"You guys are staying too?" Bianca asked, surprised.

"Do you mind?" Cassio replied. "If it's a problem-"

"No, no. It's fine," she quickly added, her eyes softening. "I just didn't expect it. Nancy is staying too so you guys will have to share the guest room with two twin beds."

I was surprised to hear my mom was staying. And I haven't seen her touch alcohol since she arrived.

"What do you say, Hannah and Arianna? Do we have enough adults?" I asked them both. They were used to their grandparents, but today they had a lot of new faces. They didn't know Luca and Cassio were their uncles and would kill anyone that even looked their way wrong.

"Yes," they both agreed unanimously.

"Great," I said. "Are you ready, Cara Mia?"

She narrowed her eyes.

“Yes. Though I am surprised you are asking, Nico. I was sure you’d demand me to be ready.”

I fucking loved her backbone. Our bantering was like foreplay. It made my cock stir to life. And no matter what, I loved that she didn’t give a fuck about appeasing me. She stood up for her beliefs and people she cared about.

“Okay, you two lovebirds,” Luciano announced, his eyes shining with amusement. “Off you go, we will handle everything here.”

“The girls need to be in bed by nine,” Bianca commenced, but Grace quickly stopped her.

“We got it,” she assured her. “Kids will be in bed and asleep before nine. They had an exciting day. Ella and I will give them a bath and tuck them all in.”

“Okay.” Bianca was nervous and it was understandable. She got to know the ladies, but they were still strangers to her. “My cell phone number is on the fridge, just text to let me know it all went well.”

“Will do,” Grace confirmed. “In fact, I’ll text you now so you have my number.”

Bianca hugged her girls, then my mother, then her girls again, and if those two wouldn’t have taken off, I was sure she would have hugged them again. I didn’t mind it though; it made me want to have children with her right away, a big family. Just like she wanted. She was a good mother, and I knew she’d rather die than let anything happen to our kids.

This woman brought out the side of me I didn’t know existed. She made me hope for things I never wanted… a loving wife, children, warm home full of laughter, and homemade cooking.

It could be dangerous in my world, full of power struggles and money hungry people, to want things like that. It was a vulnerability, a weakness. People destroyed your loved ones just to bring you to your knees. My parents were a perfect example. Benito used Nicoletta to teach my

father a lesson. My father learned, but it destroyed my mother.

But I'd keep my wife, twins, and any other children we have safe. And I intended to have a big family, just like she wanted. Fuck, I'd give her anything she wanted. Except her freedom.

I had Lorenzo change her birth control pills for the same shape vitamins during the wedding ceremony. Throughout the day, he arranged for the guys to pack up Bianca's and girls' things and have them moved to my mansion. There were just a few things left here for the occasions we'd stay here. Because I knew she'd want to come back. This was her safe haven.

Fifteen minutes later, I held the door to my Bugatti Centodieci open for my wife and helped her into it. She wanted to change out of her wedding dress, but I asked her to keep it on until we got to my place. She indulged me but she grabbed a wrap and covered her shoulders. She had taken her train off earlier today. Well, better term was she had my mother cut it off.

Once she was settled in, I shut the door and went around to the driver side. I drove us off Gibson Island through the gate and down Mountain Road.

Bianca remained quiet, her eyes locked to the view out the window. A storm was coming. I wasn't superstitious but my sixth sense was warning me there was more than just bad weather coming.

"So what kind of car is this?" she finally asked, breaking the silence.

"Bugatti Centodieci."

"Sounds expensive," she muttered unimpressed.

She didn't particularly care for luxury or expensive things. She valued the people she loved more than things she owned. Except for that house. She loved that house. I couldn't decide whether it was because of the memories she shared with her late husband or was it something else.

“So does this car have a radio?” she asked, eyeing the dashboard. She leaned forward, and fiddled with the buttons. It didn’t take her long to find the stereo. “What kind of music do you listen to?”

“Not Sean Paul,” I said.

She laughed. “Yeah, I would guess not. He’s an acquired taste.”

Pushing the button forward, over and over again, she kept reading the artist's names. Till she stopped.

“Ray Charles?” She seemed genuinely surprised.

“Yes, he is one of my favorites.”

“Well, well, well,” she murmured, leaving the music on, then leaned back against her seat. “Dad would have loved you.”

I chuckled. “My mother already loves you.”

It wasn’t an exaggeration. My mother had made an effort for the first time since Nicoletta’s death to refrain from drinking. She used to abstain from alcohol the days she would see my sister, but since her death, she no longer bothered. She found oblivion in her alcohol.

“My mom-” she paused as if searching for words, “… has been Benito’s mistress for a long time.” She cleared her throat. “I-I’m not quite sure what she likes and doesn’t like.”

I took her hand in mine and squeezed it gently. “She cares about you. Anyone with two eyes can see that.”

She swallowed, and I could see her eyes glimmer with unshed tears. “Thanks,” she whispered. “I was lucky to have a good father and grandmother growing up. And even though Mom couldn’t be with us physically, she was always part of our lives.”

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

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BIANCA

My nerves were shot. I knew what was coming next. I knew this man was somehow using me for revenge. And yet, my body didn't seem to care about any of it. Just the fact that Nico Morrelli would touch me again and bring me pleasure.

Dumb. Dumber. Dumbest. That would be me.

He still held my hand in his and it was comforting. It didn't make sense, there was no logic in finding safety with a mobster but he felt like… home? There had never been a man that walked this earth to have my temper flare like Nico. Yet I didn't worry that he'd retaliate like Benito would if my mother didn't want to do something he wanted.

I watched him smoothly change lanes, passing cars on our right, his fancy car unlike any other I had ever driven in. My Honda Pilot would look like an old clunker next to this vehicle. And I loved my Pilot.

The silence in the car was killing me. There were so many things that happened today, and I wanted answers. If he answered my questions, would it mean I had to answer his questions too?

"Your mom is nice," I ended up saying.

He nodded. "She's an alcoholic." It didn't surprise me, though I noticed she didn't drink at the party. "Today has

been the first time I've seen her refrain from drinking and it was thanks to you."

Truthfully, I felt sorry for Nico's mother. Her life couldn't have been easy. Morrelli Sr. didn't hesitate to flirt with me in front of his wife. He was a sleazebag and I couldn't imagine how many times she had to endure humiliation like that. At least, Nico wasn't like his father. We agreed on remaining faithful to each other.

He wouldn't lie about that, right?

"You look like your dad," I muttered because I had nothing nice to say about his father. "Just better, I suppose. With your mother's eyes."

"You suppose?"

"Well, he's much older."

He shook his head. "I'm not sure if you meant that as a compliment or an insult. To me. I don't give a shit about him."

He glanced at me briefly before returning his attention to the road.

"I didn't mean it as an insult," I told him softly. "Nico?"

"Yes?"

I swallowed hard, then cleared my throat. "Your father… ummm, he's unfaithful to your mom."

His jaw clenched so hard the muscles in his neck strained.

"Yes, he is."

My heart squeezed - in sympathy for her and fear that Nico would do that to me. Taking a deep breath in, I just had to spit it out. "Does our discussion about…. well, about fidelity in marriage."

Bu-bum. Bu-bum.

"I'll murder any man you touch," he growled and I stiffened. "You can murder any woman I touch." I wasn't sure how to take that. "Though in full disclosure, I have no intention of touching anyone beside you. You are my wife and I want you." Oh my gosh! His possessive tone actually

made me swell with warmth. I liked how he laid claim and offered me to do the same with him. “I’m not my father, Bianca.”

I smiled softly. He didn’t strike me as his father at all.

“He seems-” I searched for the right word, but I only had one. “He seems cruel,” I finally said. I wasn’t sure if it was the right thing to say. After all, the men of the underworld were ruthless.

“He is. He competes with Benito King for the top spot in cruelty.” I stiffened at the mention of him. “Except my father is weak and easily distracted by women and drugs. He can’t quite keep up with the sharks.” Nico’s voice was pleasant, calm, devoid of any emotion.

I wondered if there was a secondary reason for that confession. I waited, staring at him hoping he would give me more but he had closed down.

“You two don’t get along?”

Nico gave me a wry look. “Did it look to you like we got along?”

I gulped. “No, I suppose not. Did you ever get along?”

“No.” His tone was hard. “His idea of raising his children was to torment us. I couldn’t wait to become old enough and beat him at every single pathetic game of his.”

A sharp gasp escaped me. This was Nico Morrelli - the man that ruled the underworld with an iron fist.

“You seem shocked.” I wasn’t sure if he was trying to mock me or was just stating the facts.

“I’m sure he loves you,” I murmured low, though I wasn’t sure. If he was anything like Benito, that couldn’t have been good for Nico when he was growing up.

“My father only loves himself and would sacrifice anyone, including his children or wife, for his own benefit and greed.” It was hard to believe a father, or anyone for that matter, would be so selfish. I have been so fortunate with my family. Why was it that good women always got the shittiest men?

“That must have been hard for your mom,” I said with a heavy sigh. I knew it was hard for my mom.

“Yes, it was. Hence her drinking problem.”

“Was their marriage arranged or something along those lines? She seems fairly young.”

“No, she fell for him, much to my grandfather’s dismay. But at least he was smart enough to tie all her fortune so my father couldn’t get his hands on it. She is fifty-nine. My father is in his seventies.”

My new husband was giving me insight into his life, but I still felt blind as a bat.

“Hmmm, that’s quite a bit of age difference,” I murmured.

“What about your mom and Benito?” Maybe he was giving me crumbs of information so he could get information on my mom. “It’s not easy to live with someone like Benito King.”

That was an understatement.

“My mom is not an alcoholic,” I said though if I was being honest, I wouldn’t have known either way. I knew very little about my mother, only what my grandmother and Dad have told me over the years. “Truthfully, I didn’t see my mom a lot when growing up. Actually, I barely saw her. But I love her and she loves me. That’s all that matters.”

My mother had sacrificed a lot for me and the least I could do was to show her my respect and love. She had both, and I’d never give up on her. “That man… Benito King, he’s sucking the life out of her,” I whispered the admission.

Silence followed, my heart clenching in my chest. God, I wanted to scream and yell, beg for help. I’d crawl on my knees and plead with anyone to get that man eliminated and save my mother.

Nico’s deep voice pulled me back from my thoughts. “You don’t look like your mom,” he stated the obvious.

“No.” It was on the tip of my tongue to say I looked like my dad but I stopped myself. It had been my standard answer for years. Though with this man, I had a feeling he’d see right through it. He saw him on the video earlier, he’d be able to tell I looked nothing like him.

My dad, or the man that raised me, had dark hair and eyes but a completely different shade from mine, and our features were different.

We remained quiet for the rest of the drive until we arrived at the gate, a property surrounded by tall fences and trees, making it appear like we were entering the dark forest.

The guard must have recognized the vehicle because the gate immediately slid to the right, giving us an entryway. We drove for a while until we came to the clearing and my mouth just about dropped.

At the end of the large property stood a manicured lawn with elaborate manor estate, lit from the inside and out, glowing in the distance. The marble grand staircase cascaded in front of the house, giving it a regal look. The house was massive, probably ten mansions combined on Gibson Island would be smaller than this place.

“You live here?” I asked in shock.

“Welcome home, Bianca.”

There was no way he lived here alone. The freaking place was massive. Not huge, but massive.

“Please tell me you don’t live with your parents,” I muttered.

“No, just me. Now it will be just us.”

“Your freaking electric bill has to be astronomical.” I shifted in my seat, staring at the massive manor. Turning my head his way, I shook my head again. “You fucking charged interest and gave me bullshit about that money, yet you live ***here***.”

“I think we both know it wasn’t about the money,” Nico said, his voice gruff. The car came to a stop.

“Then what is it about?” I questioned him in a low voice. I didn’t hold much hope that he would answer.

A heavy sigh vibrated through the inside of the car and he pushed his hand through his thick, dark hair.

“I had a younger sister.” My head whipped his way and I held my breath, waiting for him to continue as I watched him. “She was the better part of our family. She loved art, ballet, and dancing. She spent a lot of time traveling between Miami, Baltimore, and New York with her three galleries.” I had a feeling this didn’t have a good ending. “Benito King is known to take what he wants. With the wealth on my mother’s side and businesses I accumulated, he couldn’t trap us into an arrangement for her. But like I said, my father is greedy, selfish, and stupid. He was Benito’s way in to get Nicoletta. They traded. Nicoletta for a piece of underage ass that my father wanted that week.”

A shudder of disgust shot through me at his despicable father and Benito. God, I couldn’t think about that man as my father. And his father was no better. They both deserved death.

“Oh my God,” I gasped. I had an inclination where this was going.

“I was traveling and decided to stop by one of her galleries to see her.-” his voice trailed off. “I found her in one of her galleries, bleeding to death. She was severely beaten, raped by multiple, sadistic men, and left to bleed out on the floor. I brought her home but-”

I reached out and took his hand gripping the wheel, white knuckled, and intertwined our fingers. There was pain and anguish in his voice and my anger dissipated, being replaced by compassion. Nobody should endure such brutality.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. He tried to keep his emotions in check, but I could see how much he cared about his sister. “She didn’t deserve that. Nobody does.”

“She would have liked you,” he added, his thumb gently stroking my skin.

I swallowed. “I would have liked her too,” I rasped low. Benito was a sadistic lunatic. Just hearing this made my stomach tied in knots. My mother has been with him for twenty-six years. I couldn’t even fathom what she has endured.

“Nico-” I commenced but wasn’t sure how to go about it. Then I chickened out. I couldn’t tell him about my family’s arrangement. “How do ***I*** play into all this though?”

He raised our interlocked hands, his lips brushing softly against each knuckle. “Tonight is our honeymoon,” he spoke low, his mouth hot on my skin. “We deserve to enjoy it. You, my wife-” I swallowed hard at the intensity in his eyes. “... deserve the best of everything.”

A shudder ran down my body. God, my body already tingled with need for him. “Come, Cara Mia. I want to carry you over the threshold.”

He exited the vehicle before I could say another word and came around to open the door to the car for me. Extending his hand, he helped me out of it and despite my distrust and prior anger at this man, his admissions during this car ride made me see him in a different light. He was a caring, protective brother that grieved at too soon of a loss caused by a cruel man.

Yes, he could be ruthless, but he was a man of circumstance. Considering his upbringing and cruelty he had witnessed, it wasn’t surprising that he could be overwhelming and scary. But he wasn’t as bad as I initially thought. He was protective and a better man than any other man I had ever met.

“Nico?” I murmured softly, locking eyes with his wet stone gray gaze. “You- you are a much better man than your father. Or Benito. Or any other man I know.”

I couldn’t help but admire his determination and his strength. He was his sister’s protector and blamed himself

for failing. I stood next to him, still in my wedding dress, his strong, hard body towering above me, and I couldn't help loving his strong form. I had never seen a man that looked that good in a suit. I'd be a liar if I said I didn't want him, and I suspected he knew. He was too perceptive and probably recognized my body's message even before I could process it myself.

My heart pumped hard, sending adrenaline and desire and warmth through every single part of my body. My heart pulsed with feelings I didn't dare label. A tender trust settled between us and an ache began in my chest. It was for him.

My husband.

The wind picked up and thunder rumbled through the sky. Suddenly, Nico swept me up into his arms, carrying me up his grand marble staircase that led into his manor.

Despite everything that happened today, a laugh escaped through my lips.

"Nico!" I exclaimed, my hands clinging to his neck. "You are going to break your back," I warned, smiling.

"It would take a lot more than lifting you into my arms to break my back."

"Show off," I muttered while my heart started drumming faster. The last three days have been a rollercoaster, giving me whiplash from hour to hour. It all led us here. Me in his home, in his bed.

I shouldn't care about how compatible or non-compatible we were. My future wouldn't be here or with him. A sharp pain pierced through me, but I didn't care to evaluate it. I didn't need to complicate shit more.

He had his agenda. I had mine. *Finito!*

I'd enjoy his body and he'd enjoy mine.

My eyes took in Nico's home. It was like a palace. The wealth and luxury were evident everywhere.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked, my head turning left and right, while he carried me through the

doorway.

“It has been in my mother’s family for a few generations.”

“Hmmm.”

I tried to free myself from his hold so I could walk, but he refused to let me go.

“We came through the door,” I scolded him. “No need to carry me through this monstrosity of a house. I mean, where are the bedrooms? A mile away?”

He threw his head and laughed. A true, free laugh, and I stared mesmerized by the sound of it. I liked it.

“Not quite,” his voice held a note of laughter. “Would you like a tour?”

I rolled my eyes. “Do we even have that kind of time?”

I was half-joking. The truth was that my insides hummed with excitement and the stupid slut in me wanted his mouth and hands on me. I might as well enjoy the benefits of being married while I can.

My father always told me that trust, love, and lust were all intertwined. I wasn’t sure if I agreed. Because with Nico Morrelli, I trusted him with my body but not anything else.

“How about the kitchen and then the bedroom?” he suggested.

He knew me well because those were the main places I hung out in my own home. It was as if he wanted me to feel at home in this monstrosity of the house. I was more likely to get lost in this place.

“Sure,” I murmured my agreement.

He walked down the grand foyer that had the biggest crystal chandelier and continued towards the back. There wasn’t a part of this house that was modest. The evidence of wealth was everywhere.

“This place is very flashy,” I grumbled for no reason. Or maybe I had a reason. He blackmailed me into marriage for pocket change in his terms.

We arrived on the other side of the house, the large kitchen empty.

“You can change whatever you like,” he said softly. “Redecorate the entire house how you want.” I didn’t know where to look first, my eyes darting left and right, trying to absorb it all. “Just don’t change my office,” he added. “I’m fond of it the way it is.”

I wouldn’t be around to redecorate anything, but I kept the words to myself. Instead, I scanned the open-plan kitchen bleeding into an immense balcony, lit up romantically, giving me a glimpse of its shadows. This was every chef’s dream kitchen. I was by no means a chef, but holy macaroni. This room was gorgeous.

This time, I slid down Nico’s body and slowly walked around the massive room. I must have looked ridiculous roaming around the kitchen, still wearing my wedding dress. I didn’t care. Marble countertops were exactly the way I liked them, white with the splashes of gray. Trailing my fingers over the smooth surface, I couldn’t find one thing I didn’t like. Even the dark cabinets. The stove was superb and there were two of them. There were four ovens and two large Sub Zero refrigerators.

“You have a cook?” I asked. I knew the answer but his gaze tracking my every movement made me nervous.

“I do but he knows to let you do your thing.” I threw him a side glance. I wouldn’t ask someone that worked here to get out of the way because I wanted to tinker in the kitchen. It wouldn’t be fair.

Besides, I won’t be around long, I reminded myself again. Why was it so easy to forget myself around this man? My husband.

I headed towards the ceiling to floor glass wall and noticed a discrete door handle. This place was what you saw in the movies, not real life. Luxury, wealth, and cool perfection everywhere. The view was magnificent even in

the dark. The soft glow spread throughout the balcony and the back yards with the massive pool in the center of it.

I sensed Nico's eyes on the back of my neck. It scared the shit out of me how in tune my body was to him.

Glancing to my left, I spotted my purse there.

"How did that get here?" I wondered out loud. I left it in the car. Heading for it, I dug for my phone.

"One of the staff brought it when we arrived."

"Fast." They had to be right behind us, taking a shortcut.

"Efficient," he retorted back.

"Hmmm." I checked my cell and saw Grace sent a few messages. Sliding them open, there were a few pictures of kids' smiling faces. The last one was of Luca, Cassio, and Luciano, each with a kid on their shoulders and the kids' wide grins. Cassio had Hannah, Luca had Arianna, and Luciano had his son.

Family.

It was a family photo. It gave out family vibes and feels. Luca and Cassio would never know they were uncles to my twins. My girls would never know they had uncles. It was for the better I told myself, but something deep inside me kept calling me on my bullshit.

"Everything good?" Raising my head, I met his eyes. They could be so cold, yet burn with such passion. I sensed he had his own scars hidden within the depths of the secrets. Especially after his revelation about his sister.

Sizzling attraction, two souls, and many secrets. Add revenge to that mix, and it was a recipe for disaster.

There was no concern in his stormy gaze. He would have known before me if something would have happened. Unlike any other man I have ever met, this man exercised control and power over everything and everyone.

I nodded.

Longing to get lost in him, in this powerful lust that brewed between us and the longing of my body for his

touch was so strong, it was terrifying.

Because I knew it wouldn't last.

Because he had his own agenda and revenge that somehow involved me.

Because my days were counting down.

As if pulled by invisible force, I found my steps leading me to him. Nico Morrelli, my master manipulator and my husband, was my gravity.

So far, the status quo with him has either angered me or turned me on. Like there wasn't an in-between.

His hands came around my waist and he gripped it tightly, as his lips sought mine. He kissed me long and deep, hard and possessive. This man dominated my body with ease. It petrified me that he could dominate my heart too. It scared the daylights out of me.

Lifting me up effortlessly, my hands around his nape, our mouths continued colliding, a hungry dance.

I had no idea how we found ourselves in the bedroom, my back against the wall. When this man touched me, everything faded except for him. The world could be on fire, the Earth burning, but with Nico's hands on me, I'd miss it all.

I slid off his body, standing chest to chest, devouring the taste of my husband. He pulled the side zipper of my dress down and stepped back.

"Take it off," he commanded, his eyes burning with flames my body felt.

Without resistance, I immediately obeyed. It was what I wanted too. His hands on my skin, his mouth on my flesh. I was dying for it.

I shimmied out of my form fitting dress, leaving me in my lacy, white panties and matching, strapless bra. Courtesy of Nico Morrelli. He thought of everything when he bought my wedding dress. The white dress pooled around my feet, waiting for his next instruction.

"Your bra," his voice was hoarse.

My hands trembled as I reached behind me to obey him. I might banter with him on everything else, but in this department, I was more than happy to oblige. Tossing the bra on the ground, I waited for his next instruction.

The room was dark, the only light coming from the glow of the moon shining through the large windows. He loomed like a tall, dark shadow over me, still wearing his pristine suit while I practically stood naked in front of him. I knew his next order before he even uttered it.

“Panties.” One word. Last piece of clothing till I was completely at his mercy.

Naked.

Exposed.

His.

I hooked my fingers into the lacy band and pushed them down my thighs and legs. I stepped out of them, my eyes never wavering from him.

His jaw ticked, as if he held on to his control by a thread. I wanted to push him, see him lose control. I wanted to see the man hiding behind that steel wall. He walked the short steps to me, the cloth of his suit brushing against my soft flesh.

He gripped my neck, sliding his hand upwards into my hair; then pulled my face close to his, our breaths mingling while my heart thundered against my ribcage. His other hand ran up my thighs, until it came to my sweet spot and the second his thumb brushed against it, a moan vibrated in the room.

I wanted to touch his body, feel his hot skin against my flesh. So far, he has touched the most intimate parts of my body while I have yet to touch his skin, see *his* body. My hands reached for his jacket, pushing it off his shoulder and discarding it on the floor with my wedding dress.

“I want to touch you,” I whispered, my breathing erratic. His teeth nipped the delicate flesh along my neck, setting

off an inferno inside me. My hands frantically took off his shirt next, hungry for his naked skin.

I finally got my confirmation - he had a tattoo on his lower neck, his chest, and one whole sleeve. A fierce wolf on his chest stared at me. I couldn't make out the details of his other ink.

Next time, I promised myself. There was something so damn hot about seeing him go from a clean cut man in an expensive suit to this. Even in the dark of the room, I could see he was beautiful, his abs solid, his muscles strong.

He kicked off his shoes, followed by his socks, but his pants stayed on. I wanted them gone. My hand looped through his belt, fumbling with it. I didn't get far, losing my train of thought as his mouth latched on to my neck, nipping hard. A yelp escaped me, and he followed up with a brush of his tongue.

My heartbeat in my throat, this need clawing at me, I couldn't get enough. Every inch of my body burned for him. My breasts were heavy, my nipples tight. His mouth closed around them and a throaty sigh escaped.

"Please," I breathed, the desire thick in my veins. My hands wrapped around his nape holding on for balance, my fingers trailing the back of his neck. His flesh was hot, like a heater turned to its highest setting.

His palms gripped my ass, kneading the flesh. This sensation was so foreign, something I had never felt before. His fingers slid low, brushing against my back entrance. My body reacted before my mind protested and my hips rolled against his hands for more.

"Fuck." His voice was rough.

His hand slid further, his one finger pushing inside of me without a warning. My head fell back against the wall, my eyes fluttering shut. He fingerfucked me slowly, in and out, the pressure building between my legs, promising me the heights only this man could deliver. The pleasure coiled deep inside my belly, needing more, meeting his thrusts.

Before the pleasure overtook me, he pulled his finger out of me, leaving emptiness behind.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he ordered, and I instantly obeyed. He moved us over to the large bed, sitting himself on the edge of it and me straddling his lap. My hips rocked against his thigh, the material of his pants causing a delightful friction.

“Greedy,” he groaned, his mouth latching onto my breast, dragging his teeth across my sensitive nipple and then sucking it slowly. I didn’t know whether he was talking about me or himself, and I didn’t care.

I fucking needed more.

I swayed against him, my sensitive, throbbing pussy probably leaving wet marks on his pants.

“Oh God,” I moaned, running my hand through his hair. His hand came in between our bodies, rubbing back and forth, a firm, hot pressure against my clit. This man lit my body from the inside out.

“You are fucking mine,” he growled against my skin, marking it with his teeth.

“Yes, yes, yes.” I rocked my hips mindlessly. If he’d asked me to give him my forever now, I would. Whatever he wanted, as long as he made this hot buildup inside me burst into the sweetest pleasure.

He sucked a nipple into his mouth, then slid two fingers deep inside me. It was the sweetest damn torture. The night air in the bedroom filled with our moans, wet sounds of his fingers pushing in and out of me while the fire burned in my belly with a blaze only he could sate.

His mouth on my skin was rough, leaving evidence of it all over my pale flesh. It felt good; I wanted it hard. He kissed me with his lips, tongue, and teeth, while his fingers slipped in and out of me faster and harder, pulling wetness to my clit and a coiled, tight pleasure exploded through my veins. It burned like an inferno, consuming and wild. With a cry, I came hard. A violent shudder fluttered through my

body before the heat spread and white lights swam behind my eyelids.

As I came back down, the deep rasp of his voice rumbled through me. “I fucking love the way your body responds to me.”

Our eyes met and his were full of reverence or awe. I couldn’t read him. His eyes were heavy-lidded, the color of dark, stormy clouds, pulling me into its depths.

His fingers slid out of my entrance and my cheeks flushed hot. I watched him in fascination as he brought his hand up, slowly licking his fingers clean. Our eyes locked, his hand around my nape pulled me to his lips and before he kissed me, his next words set me on fire all over again.

“Taste yourself on my lips.” His voice was hoarse. Our lips met, the taste of him and my wetness intoxicating. Our tongues brushed together, setting match to my flames and turning them into a raging inferno.

This couldn’t be healthy. I didn’t care for healthy; I wanted another dose of his high.

“Get on the bed,” he ordered against my lips, his tone harsh.

I lifted off of him, my arousal smeared over his pants. I sat on my ass, my eyes on him. There was restraint and a hardness in his eyes, matching his tone, that made my heart drum against my ribcage, sending fear down my spine. Benito’s words flashed in my mind, ruining this moment.

His gaze flashed at my hesitance.

“Nico?” I called out softly to him. There was darkness, a dominance, in him. It called to me, but fucking Benito planted a seed of fear into me. “Just-just don’t hurt me,” I whispered low, crawling backwards, my eyes never leaving him.

The fragrance around the room enveloped me, the mixture of my arousal and Nico’s scent. A deep forest, a manly scent that I first got a whiff of in the restaurant all

those weeks ago. Holding my stare, he slipped his pants off, and boxers followed. I drew my tongue across my bottom lip, tempted to lift and lick every damn inch of him.

My husband had a body worth worshiping. The ink on his chest and neck was barely visible in darkness, though it definitely needed more of my attention. Hunger crawled up my spine, mixing with fear and anxiety. His thick cock was hard.

“I’d cut my dick off before I hurt you,” he assured me. Maybe I was stupid, but I found myself trusting him again - in this matter anyhow. So far, he always ensured my pleasure.

I licked my lips, my eyes locked on his hard erection. He was big, I had never had anyone so big inside me. My pulse thundered in my throat, lust in my veins, the best kind of adrenaline.

He crawled over me, covering my soft body with his hard one. His body tensed as my fingers trailed down his neck, but he let me. The ink on his lower neck and one shoulder looked beautiful in the dark; though I couldn’t distinguish what it was exactly. A flower, I guessed.

My hands slid down his chest, down his hard abs.

“You are so beautiful,” I murmured, my eyes roaming over his body hovering over me. He was the perfect mixture of hard and beautiful. I had never felt this raging desire for another man. “I- I…” I wanted to tell him it has been a long time for me, but the words got stuck in my throat. The admission refused to come; not that I was ashamed of it. “We should get a condom,” I ended up saying, trailing my fingers lightly over the line of hair that led below his navel. I didn’t stop; it went lower and lower still until my hand wrapped around his cock.

God, I loved touching him.

His hips pushed further into my palm. His cock was hard, smooth, and hot. The throbbing ache between my legs increased tenfold, and I felt so empty.

“No condoms,” he groaned, pressing himself against me. My eyes snapped up, but before I could say anything, he gritted. “I’m clean and you are on the pill.”

His look on me was dark, maddening, possessive.

“I’m clean too,” I rasped. I spread my legs open, locking my ankles behind his back as he settled himself between my legs, his erection gliding over my slick entrance. He thrust inside me in one, powerful move, filling me to the hilt. My back arched off the bed, relishing the sensation of being full, one with him. He was hard as stone and so big.

His forehead fell against mine, his gaze scorching into mine and searing my soul. He remained so deep inside me that I didn’t know where I ended and he began.

“My. Nirvana.” His voice was hoarse, his chest panting for air while my breaths came out erratic. “I own you.” Rebellion flared inside me, but before I could contradict him, he added, “And you own me.”

Ah fuck! This man was breaking me, slowly and sweetly.

“Fuck me. Hard,” I breathed, the pulse between my thighs.

“Beg me,” he ordered, his voice a mixture of demand and rasp, nipping my jaw. “Beg me to fuck you hard.”

I clenched my entrance, my pussy gripping his cock deep inside me. He hissed.

“Beg. Me.” His voice was a hoarse demand and he swayed his hips side to side, loosening my core, sliding in deeper. “Beg me, Cara Mia.”

My core muscles clenched around his hard length, needing him to start moving.

“Please.” I begged on a whimper. “Please, fuck me. Hard.” I panted. “Please, Nico. I want you. Need you.”

Easing out of me, he powered back into me. He moved, harder and faster, hitting that sweet spot inside me that was flooding my core with need. His pace increased with each thrust and his gray eyes darkened with something hot.

“Hands up above your head,” he growled, and when I immediately complied, I swore he felt even bigger inside me. To my horror, I felt a gush of wetness trickling down my inner thighs. *What is this man doing to me?* His hands snaked under my ass and he gripped tight as he slammed back into me.

My breath rushed out, and before I could take another breath, he thrusted back into me. Rough.

“Fuck,” I gasped.

He stilled, and my fingers curled around the iron rods of his headboard, gripping them tightly. Or risk putting my hands on his butt and digging my nails into his ass.

“Don’t… stop…” I cried. “Please. Don’t. Fucking. Stop.”

He withdrew fully, and before I could panic that he was leaving me, he pounded into me again, and again. His fingers gripped my ass, and I knew he’d leave bruises. I didn’t care. He set a fast and brutal pace, thrusting into me deeper and harder.

A throaty moan left me with each thrust of his cock, his pelvis grounding against my clit, setting off fireworks within me.

“So wet.”

Thrust.

“So fucking beautiful.”

His thrusts ignited flames in my veins.

“Mine.”

His hips worked ruthlessly, taking me higher and higher. Nico Morrelli fucked me hard. Flesh against flesh. The weight of him, brutal and exuberant. Every hard thrust created a spark that would soon explode into a million stars.

I clenched the iron bars so hard, I would see imprints in my palms for days.

His one hand wrapped around my throat, and on instinct, I pushed into it, exposing my neck. It was rough, restrictive, and so fucking addictive.

“Who fucks you?” he growled, his fingers squeezing lightly around my windpipe. I could feel him everywhere, deep inside me, around me, in my heart and my soul.

“You do.”

He pushed hard inside me, bruising me with his thrusts, and I loved every second of it. The intensity of his touch, his mouth, his thrusts would kill me, and it would be the best kind of death.

“Nobody touches you, Bianca.” His voice was a harsh command.

“Nobody,” I breathed. “Just you.”

A rumble of satisfaction sounded from him and he rewarded me with another thrust, filling me hard and deep, to the hilt, all the while his pelvis pressed hard on my clit.

“Mine!” His tone was possessive, hard.

A scream pierced the air as a violent orgasm shattered through me. Heat pulsed through my veins, my body shuddering hard around him, and with the last hard thrust, Nico’s body shuddered above me and followed me over the cliff with a guttural roar.

His head buried into the side of my neck, as his thrusts turned deep and slow, as he spilled inside me, every single drop of him buried deep inside me.

I am so fucked, doomed, ruined.

My husband was the best kind of addiction. One night and he was buried deep inside of me. Figuratively and literally.

Both of our breathing filled the silence of the dark room and time stilled. This connection with him was raw, thrilling and better than I’d ever envisioned. It terrified me, sending a fear straight to the marrow of my bones.

“You ok?” His raspy voice broke the thick darkness around us. He lifted his head, his steel eyes seeking out mine. He peeled my fingers off the bed rails and brought each hand to his lips, kissing my palm.

I was far from okay, but for all different reasons than he was asking. My chest ached and the feelings I didn't dare analyze boomed inside. Great! One mind-blowing orgasm and I was spiraling into an abyss.

I took a deep breath, then another before I answered in a soft voice. "Yes. You?"

A dazzling smile spread across his face. "Fuck, yes."

My heart pounded against my breast, my body slack in his arms. I have never experienced anything like this. Not even close. His arms slung around me, holding me tightly against his hard muscles.

He nuzzled his cheek against mine and then turned his mouth to lay a soft kiss on my lips. My whole body buzzed with the adrenaline we just shared. But this soft kiss… it was timeless and passionate, like we shared one breath.

I was falling for Nico Morrelli.

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Chapter Thirty

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NICO

The storm screamed outside, while I stared at the dark ceiling. Bianca's naked body laid tucked close to me, her snow white complexion a stark contrast to the black sheets and the comforter.

Finally, she was mine. The word seared into my chest, my heart, and my soul. Nothing and nobody would take her away from me.

A little bruise formed on her neck from my rough mouth and a pang of guilt hit me upon seeing it. I rutted her like a starved beast. My control never slipped, but with her, I lost all my senses, seeking oblivion and pleasure only she could give me.

My hands roamed her body to ensure she wasn't hurt, but there was nothing but her smooth soft skin. The way she responded to me, the way she gave her all to me. She was my nirvana, and I'd need a daily dose of it for the rest of my life.

I would make her love me and need me, because fuck if I would go at it alone now. She already desired me but it wasn't enough. I wanted it *all*.

The last time I took her body, I knew she was exhausted, yet I couldn't get enough of her. She was half-asleep and even in her sleep her body responded to my touch. She

opened her legs in invitation, and though I knew I should let her sleep, I selfishly took her again. And again.

I had taken Bianca numerous times over the course of the night. Instead of this obsession with her easing, it intensified. I knew it would be good with her, but this was… Fuck, I didn't have a word for it. Electric.

Bianca was an amazing woman. A dream come true. She was strong, passionate about the people she loved, and compassionate. I never wanted to have a wife and children, but now… it was all I needed. She was my life. I admired her love for her children, her quiet strength and how she fought like a lioness for the people she loved. She'd never take a defeat when it came to her children. She'd burn this world down to keep them safe. Just as I would to keep her safe. She was my other half. As cliché as it sounded, she completed me.

Bianca's body stirred next to me, and I looked at her sleepy face, eyebrows scrunching in her sleep. She murmured something about body heat and tucked herself deeper into me.

This is where she belongs.

As I watched her now, a throb ached in my chest and I knew I'd burn down this world to keep her and the twins safe. This woman was weaving herself into every fiber of me. It probably started the first time I saw her all those years ago.

It didn't bode well for me, but I didn't fucking care.

This next move would be the final chess piece in my revenge. I reached for my cell phone that sat on my nightstand.

The unread text waited for me. It was from Alexei Nikolaev. He was the key in ensuring Bianca's mother was safe when Benito found out that Bianca was his daughter.

I read his message.

Bene. Good.

Things were in place, one last move.

I pulled the sheet over Bianca's breast. Wrapping my hand around her, keeping the sheet firmly against her chest, I snapped a selfie, then examined the picture.

Bianca's sleeping face on my chest, against the wolf tattoo, my forearm against her chest, the black sheet between her skin and my arm, clearly indicated she was naked and what had just happened.

I knew this next move would stir a shitstorm. I didn't care about it, but I cared about Bianca. I had tripled the security around the compound, the Carters, and her old house. It still didn't ease the guilt. Yet, how could I break my promise to my little sister? It was simple; I couldn't.

Striding down Fifth Avenue in New York City, I approached the polished glass front of my sister's gallery. Seeing it made me swell with pride. Nicoletta accomplished all this all on her own. Her eye and love of art made her one of the most popular art dealers in the world.

The best part was that she had stayed away from the underworld and all its dirty deeds. I just wished she'd stay with me at the manor instead of with our parents. Our father was a scumbag and our mother, though I loved her, tended to turn a blind eye to his misdeeds and drown her sorrows in alcohol.

I pressed the intercom button but got no response. It should have been my cue that something was horribly wrong. I punched in my code and entered the gallery. It was empty, not a security guard in sight.

I rushed through the front part of the gallery, and the moment I entered the atrium, I saw her. It felt like my heart stopped beating at that very moment. Nicoletta's body lay sprawled on the floor, her clothes in shreds hanging off her. Blood pooled around her, soaking her hair and her skin.

"Nicoletta," I choked out, lowering myself onto my knees while glancing around, but instinctively I knew nobody was around. They left her to die.

I gently lifted her upper torso, my eyes scanning the wounds. Jesus Christ! There wasn't a part of her body that wasn't marked. Blood, cuts, and bruises smeared her inner thighs, her ribs looked broken. Anger and sorrow burned through me like inferno, setting blazing fire in my chest and making it hard to breathe. I could barely detect the pulse.

Reaching for my phone, I dialed Leonardo. He answered on the first ring.

"Nicoletta is hurt. Need a car." I hung up and pressed my forehead against my sister's. She was too cold.

"Just stay with me," I whispered.

Her eyes fluttered open, bruised and broken. Something died inside me seeing that shattered look in her gray eyes. A soft, barely audible whimper left her lips.

"Shhh, I'm here," I murmured, my chest hurting like a motherfucker. "I'm here," I repeated, my throat constricting. Nothing had ever hurt as much as this.

"N-Nico."

"I'm here, sister." I hadn't cried since I was five, but my eyes stung right and my chest hurt.

"B-Benito," she rasped and ice shot through my chest. "D-dad gave him perm-" She was too weak to finish the sentence but violent fury made me see red. "Too many men."

I wanted to rage, burn this place and hunt those men. Yet, I couldn't do any of it, too scared to lose the only good, innocent person in life.

Her cold hand came up to my face and I focused on her, pushing the raging fog out of my brain. For her. For my sister.

"Make Benito pay," she rasped before passing out.

Those were her last words. She was still alive and barely breathing when I brought her home, the doctors waiting for us. But there was no saving her. She had no will to live.

I couldn’t fail her; break my promise. She deserved that much from me. I failed in protecting her, but I wouldn’t fail her in punishing those that hurt her. I was able to hunt and kill all those men, except Benito. He was the last chess piece left.

I pulled up the contact and then attached the picture and typed below it.

Your daughter for my sister.

I clicked send and the whoosh sound filled the silence.

The fall of Benito King. Checkmate.

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Chapter Thirty-One

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NICO

With two coffee mugs in hand, I headed back into the bedroom where I left Bianca sleeping. This blazing intensity between us was sure to burn this house down. I wanted to hear my name chanted on her lips over and over again, to know I was the only man she thought of, desired and… loved?

Did I have a right to demand her love? It didn't fucking matter. I would have it, because fuck if I would be the only one to break here. I would break her and put her back together, bury myself so deep inside her that there would be nobody else she could even want more. Just our children and us.

I walked into our room, careful not to wake her up. Placing both mugs onto the nightstand, I settled on the edge of the bed and watched her sleep. Fuck, I have turned into a schmuck.

Her dark hair spilled over the pillow and a lock of the silky strands covered her cheek. She slept sound and deep. She looked even younger in her sleep, her pale skin and ruby red lips stark against her dark mane. She stirred, then reached across the bed with her one hand and her brow furrowing when she found the spot empty.

I couldn’t help but wonder whether she was reaching for me.

Brushing a lock of her dark hair off her cheek, she stirred again and her hand came to mine, pressing it against her cheek. I couldn’t stop touching her, my lust for her stronger than ever.

“Nico?” Her soft voice called out, her eyes still closed.

“I’m here. Sleep.” She needed the rest. I kept her up into the early morning hours, burying myself inside her. I fucked her hard and fast, her tight muscles gripping me and pulling me under her spell. The way she clenched around my cock, her dark eyes hazed with the same lust that I felt, I would never have enough of her.

Instead, she took my hand and pulled me closer to her. “Aren’t you tired?” she murmured. “Come back to bed.”

My hands burned to touch her soft curves. Gently, I traced my fingertips down her slender neck. I bent to press my lips to her neck, right where her pulse throbbed, then inhaled the feminine scent that was so uniquely her. A little shiver worked through her body, but she didn’t open her eyes. My temptress.

I moved my mouth against her ear, my teeth scraping down the side of her throat.

“I’m going to fuck you again,” I rasped darkly against her skin. I was consumed by this need to be inside her, to feel her pussy clenched around me, feel her ripple around me as she climaxed. I was obsessed with my wife.

A low moan sounded in her throat. God, the noises she made would be the death of me. My hand slid down her body, cupping her naked breast into my palms. She arched her back off the bed, the sight of her slim body one to behold.

Impatient to get her slick for me, I left her breasts and slid my hand down her soft belly, removing the sheets off her body. I’d never tire of the sight of her naked body sprawled across my bed.

“This cunt is mine,” I murmured against her neck, sliding my fingers into her already wet folds. “Your body is mine.” My teeth scraped against her soft skin, marking her so everyone could see that she was off limits. I curled my two thick fingers inside her hot pussy and her head thrashed against the pillow. “I want to see you fall apart for me, Cara Mia,” I purred, rubbing her swollen clit as I pumped my fingers in and out of her, my palm pressing hard against her pussy.

She shivered, her nipples hardening, her hips rolling against my fingers. I watched her tongue lick at her lips and my cock throbbed, imagining her plump lips wrapped around my dick. I couldn’t resist her gorgeous tits. Lowering my mouth down her body, I pulled one taut nipple into my mouth and sucked on it, teasing the hardened peak with my teeth. Her moans echoed through the room.

“You will orgasm only for me,” I ordered. “Your body will only be mine.”

Her sweet pussy tightened and pulsed, and her skin flushed a crimson red. I watched in fascination as it spread across her pale skin. The chemistry we shared was explosive.

“Nico,” she gasped. “I- I need…” she panted, her fingers gripping the sheets, her legs parting wider for me. Her voice held a note of desire and the bastard in me relished in it. I added a third finger, stretching her tight walls to accommodate my cock when I finally buried myself into her again. I wanted her to fall apart only for me. I wanted her to be delirious with desire for me.

“Mia moglie.” *My wife.* “Break apart for me. Then I’m going to fuck you until you beg me to stop.”

That did it for my beautiful wife; she loved my dirty talk. Her body arched, her core tensed and she broke. Just for me. Her body exploded into an orgasm and cries fell from her luscious mouth, my name a raspy whisper on her lips.

She watched me through her heavy lids, her lips parted and her skin flushed as she shattered for me. I slid my fingers out and held her gaze as I licked them clean. A little hitch in her breathing, and I saw lust flare in her dark eyes. My obsession!

My wife would be my forever obsession.

I stripped out of my pajama pants, pulled off my white t-shirt, and crawled up her body.

“Spread your legs wide for me,” I ordered her as I stroked my aching, leaking cock. She obeyed without hesitation, and fuck if that didn’t make me even harder. “Use your fingers to open that pretty pink cunt and show me how wet my woman is.”

A soft whimper left her lips, a blush spreading on her neck and chest. Her fingers shook as she reached in front of her and hesitatingly did as I demanded. Her slick, pink folds open for me, I relished in the knowledge nobody would ever see her like this. Her arousal trickled down her inner thigh. There wasn’t a bigger turn-on than seeing my wife so open to me, evidence of her arousal in plain sight.

“That’s it, Cara Mia,” I praised her, my hands settling on her hips as I pulled her closer. As if she couldn’t resist, she lifted her hips up, her pussy greedy for my cock. “My greedy wife.”

Guiding my cock to her slick folds, the tip of it right at her hot entrance. Her heat made me hiss. I barely slid my cock into her pussy, and I was ready to lose all my control.

“Please, Nico,” she sobbed, her words breathless. “I need you now.”

“I have to fuck you hard,” I gritted out, my restraint teetering as I slid inside her tight pussy. I pulled back out, leaving the tip of my cock at her clenching entrance, her hips lifting off the bed.

“Oh my God,” she panted, her head thrashing against the pillows. “Give it to me. Hard.”

My fingers dug into her hips and I impaled her in one rough thrust. I nearly lost my mind when her warmth and wetness enveloped me, my cock filling her to the hilt. Both of us cried out with intense pleasure.

“Say my name.” I ordered her harshly. “Who is fucking you?”

My next assault was harder. “Y-you!” she moaned.

“Who?” I forced my tongue between her teeth, fucking her mouth and her pussy at the same time. The beast inside me demanded I claim her hard, so there’d be no memory of any of her past lovers. I pistoned into her hard again and again, pushing her body into the mattress.

“Nico! Nico!” she screamed out, her moans in tune with my each thrust. “Ah, fuck!” She pushed her hips up. “Yes, yes, yes,” she chanted against my mouth, mindless with need. She was sending me into oblivion, into a frenzy of need for her.

Her back arched, her legs came around me. I ground my hips even deeper. Her entire body shuddered underneath me and my next thrust rooted me deep inside her.

It wasn’t enough. No matter how hard I fucked her, it would never be enough. My mouth latched onto her neck, my teeth clasped her on her soft skin. I wanted the whole world to see that Bianca was mine. Bianca Morrelli was fucking mine.

My hands gripped her hips, as I pounded into her mindlessly, rutting her like a beast. Claiming her.

“Nico,” she gasped. “I-... I’m going to come.”

“Come for me!” I roared, tearing my mouth away.

I slammed into her again and she tensed, taking her over the edge. She screamed my name, thrashed and trembled against the force of the climax ripping through her. I held her hips tight, thrusting into her clenching pussy, rutting her as she broke apart around me.

My forehead pressed against hers, my own orgasm spiraled me into a void, where there was nothing except for

us. My wife and I.

I came hard, spurting inside her and filling her with my seed. A peace unlike any before settled over me. Her breathing was heavy and we stayed locked together; our pulses frantic. Her body was soft and pliable underneath me and I slowly pulled out of her.

Her hands were around my neck and I pondered when she wrapped them around me. She made me lose all sense of control, this lust for her shattering something inside me.

“Good morning,” she murmured, her breath hot on my skin.

“Good morning, wife.”

A satisfying silence settled between us and she nuzzled her face into my neck, her fingernails gently brushing against my scalp. The gesture was so innocent, yet so familiar. Intimate. My cock stirred yet again, this thirst for her unquenchable.

I wanted her again, to ease my ache for her. I had to ***fuck*** her again. Maybe it was the fact that I denied myself this woman when I first saw her back in my nightclub and now it was coming down like a ton of bricks. I always took what I wanted, yet with her I tried to be a decent man that night and walk away.

“I have to take a shower,” she muttered. The possessive side of me wanted to forbid her a shower - so her lingering scent would mix with mine, both of us smelling like sex. Jesus, what this woman did to me! It was a weakness to want someone so much.

Shifting my body, I couldn’t peel my eyes off her. She took a bedsheet and wrapped it around her before standing up. My cock throbbed, turning into a granite.

I remained on the bed, naked, watching her move about the room.

“I didn’t bring any of my stuff,” she muttered as she turned her eyes back to me. I watched her eyes darkened with desire, her gaze lingering on my chest then trailing

down my stomach. She nibbled on her lower lip, a gesture I started to get very familiar with.

“It’s all here,” I told her and her eyes met mine.

“What is?” she asked, confusion in her dark eyes, and my lip tugged upward. It was nice to see my wife got rattled by her hunger for me as I did for her.

“Your stuff.” I tilted my head to the left of her. “It’s in our closet. And your toiletries are in the bathroom.”

She followed the direction of my eyes and cracked the door open. All her clothes were already here and hung up. It was strangely comforting seeing her personal items among my own.

“Holy smokes,” she muttered, disappearing into the closet. I could only see part of her, the black bedsheet trailing behind her. I watched her profile as she trailed her fingers over my suits, shirts, then leaned over to glance at my watches lined up. “I can honestly say, Nico, I have never met a man with such an organized closet. And this room is the size of my entire first floor.”

She threw me a look over her shoulder. A growl rose inside my chest at the thought of her having other men.

“Bianca?” I worked to keep my voice even, my expression blank. I wanted the names of her past lovers so I could hunt them down and kill them.

Her gaze returned to the closet, roaming it curiously.

“Hmmm.”

“How many men have you had?” Her hand froze midair, her interest in the closet gone. She strode out of it and towards the bathroom.

“None of your business. That’s personal.”

I was out of the bed and behind her in a blink of an eye. “You are my wife,” I drawled. “Nothing is personal.”

“Of course, it is,” she retorted crankily.

She shook her head, taking a step away from me. I followed.

“Bianca-” I warned her in a growl, taking her wrist, forcing her to face me. We stared at each other, jealousy eating at me. The knowledge that another man heard those moans, felt her curves, and buried his cock into her pussy and still walked this earth drove me insane. The urge to kill was overwhelming.

“Fine,” she hissed. “Two.” She rolled her eyes, trying to pull her wrist out of my grip. Unsuccessfully.

“William is dead. Who’s the other man?” I demanded. If it was John Martin, I’d kill him today. Any other man, he’d have a twenty-four hour head start.

“You,” she snapped. “Two, including you! Jesus.”

My hold on her wrist eased. It should have been only me, but William was dead, so it left me the only man on this earth who knew how Bianca’s pussy felt. I took her other hand that gripped the sheet against her breast, peeling her fingers off and material slid off her body and onto the tile floor.

I was going to take her again.

“Nico, you can’t-”

I crushed my lips to hers and she opened for me almost immediately. I had to possess her, erase any other man’s memory from her mind. She was mine. Only mine. I cupped her ass and strode into the shower, the motion sensor triggered the shower to come on and rivulets of water meandered over us. I had to have her.

I thrust my hard cock against her entrance. I needed to be inside her hot folds. To feel her clenching around my dick. Our tongues tangled, the need all-consuming. Pushing her back against the tile, I trailed my lips down her neck. She arched her head back and my cock throbbed at such a submissive gesture.

I bit into her soft flesh, my one hand still holding her by her ass. On the impulse, I brought my other free hand to her mouth, my finger trailing her plump lips. As if on

instinct, her lips parted and her mouth closed over my digits, her tongue sliding along the tip of it.

“On your knees and suck me.”

The rough demand left my mouth and she stiffened in my arms. Pushing away from me, unsuccessfully, her eyes flared to me.

“Excuse me?” She tried to sound undignified, but her words came out too breathless, her pulse racing with excitement. And her eyes betrayed her. She fucking loved it.

“I want your pouty lips wrapped around my cock,” I murmured, taking her jaw between my fingers. “Bury my dick into your warm mouth.”

Her breaths were little pants, her skin flushed even under the shower water cascading over us. I could talk dirty all day, and she’d let me fuck her all day.

“You want to fuck my mouth?” she rasped, her eyes wide and hazed with lust. God, this woman! How did I get so lucky to get her?

“Yes.” She would bring me to my knees.

She wiggled out of my arms, sliding down my tense body. I watched her every move, the hunger for her body overwhelming all my other senses.

She obeyed and dropped to her knees. My rock-hard cock just about exploded, seeing her like that, on her knees in front of me. It was enough to have me blow my load. Her small hand came to grip the base of my cock, twitching at her touch, and her lips parted, taking me deeply into her warm mouth. My cock between her beautiful red lips was a sight to behold.

Her lips were heaven. A groan left my mouth as she slid my dick to the back of her throat, pumping her soft hand up and down my shaft. I couldn’t tear my eyes off her, memorizing every second of this moment. Her head bobbed back and forth as she licked and sucked my cock.

She fisted me at the base, pulling my skin taut as she moved her mouth up and down, over my erection. I wouldn't last long with her mouth like this.

My dick slipped wetly from her mouth and her eyes came up, hesitation in her dark gaze. "Am I doing it okay?"

My hand came around her nape and I slid my fingers into her hair. Gently, I tugged on her hair, ensuring she didn't look away.

"Have you done this before?" I rasped, every single muscle in my body taut. There was no way she had never given a blowjob.

She nibbled on her lip. "Twice," she murmured. "I-I didn't do it right."

My fingers fisted into her hair, and I tugged her face up so she could see the truth in my eyes. Shower droplets fell on me, sheltering her face as she watched me.

"You are doing it perfectly," I hissed. "Your mouth feels so good; I won't last long."

As if encouraged, her hands came to my thighs and I guided my cock back into her mouth. Like a good wife, her lips parted and my cock eased between her beautiful mouth. Her tongue swirled around the tip of it and my hips jerked forward, hitting the back of her throat.

"Fuck, that's so good." She made a little *mmmm* noise like she was enjoying it too, and it made it even better for me. "Don't let up. Don't fucking stop until I tell you to."

I grabbed the back of her head, my fingers entwining into her soft, wet mane. I moved her head back and forth to my rhythm and she wilted to my will. Her fingers curled into my skin as I fucked her mouth harder and harder. Her eyes locked on me, her eyes blazing with lust.

"That's right, Bianca," I rasped. "Fuck! Yes, take all of me."

Pleasure shot through my spine and threw my brain into a void of emptiness. I went to slide my dick out of her mouth before I blew my cum all over her tongue and down

her throat. Though it was exactly what I wanted to do - mark every single piece of her.

She refused to let my cock slip from her lips, sucking me harder, licking, and my cum shot into her throat. I watched her tongue dart across her lip, taking every drop. I dragged her to her feet and crushed my lips to hers, tasting myself on her mouth.

“Did you like me fucking your pretty mouth?” I asked her harshly against her lips, my breathing labored. She nodded. “Your mouth is heaven. And all mine, Cara Mia. I can’t wait to fuck your mouth and throat again, hear your humming noises…”

She whimpered softly, pressing her thighs together and her body leaning against me.

“I’d like that,” she admitted in a whisper.

The shower still ran and she blinked the droplets of water out of her eyes. My arms held her tight against me. In the back of my mind something warned me that losing this woman would be my undoing, but I ignored it. I would keep her safe. I have found my purpose in keeping this woman and her girls, our girls, safe.

She stepped back and smiled shyly. “We are going to run out of hot water. We better hurry up with the shower.”

I reached out for her shampoo at the same time as her. “Let me do that for you.”

Letting go of the bottle, she turned her back to me and I admired her graceful spine. I squeezed a good amount into my palm, then smoothed it over her wet hair.

Her head tilted back and my cock stirred to life. Would I ever have enough of her? I threaded my fingers through her dark hair and massaged the shampoo into her scalp. I noted a shiver run down her spine.

She closed her eyes, and I continued washing off her hair clean of shampoo. I repeated the same process with her conditioner. Both smelled like her, fresh lilacs.

“I love your body,” I murmured against her neck. “I love every single thing about you.”

Her plump ass was gorgeous. It was wrong to eye her, knowing it’d edge me to take her again. I pushed my hard cock into the back of her, my mouth against her ear, taking her earlobe between my teeth.

“See what you do to me,” I murmured. “I can’t get enough of you. Will you let me?”

She turned around to face me. “First, let me wash you too,” she whispered. Grabbing the other bottle of shampoo, I watched her pour a small amount and lift onto her tiptoes. I bent my knees and my head so she could reach my towering frame. It didn’t take her any time with my short hair.

But she didn’t stop. Her fingers trailed down my body, her eyes watching my tattoos.

“Does it mean something?” Her fingers lingered over the ink on my collarbone and lower neck. “Roses, thorns,” she leaned over licking my skin. “And a wolf. The ink is beautiful.”

Her touch was soothing, soft. I didn’t want to think about the ink. I wanted to bury myself into her folds and seek sweet oblivion. But I felt it was important to tell her.

“Roses were my sister’s favorite flower,” I told her, keeping my tone void of emotions. “Petals attract with their beauty, thorns kill with their sting. Her description of the underworld.”

“I’m sorry about your sister.” A hint of sadness and loathing flashed in her eyes, but she quickly masked it. I wondered what went through my wife’s head. I wanted to know her every thought, every desire, every worry and pain. So I could take it all off her shoulders.

Turning off the shower, I reached for the towel and patted her body dry. She did the same to me, as if we both wanted to know our bodies better. We stepped out of the shower and I lowered myself onto my knees.

“Spread your legs for me,” I told her, my mouth leveled with her pussy. Honeysuckle and lilacs. Those two scents would forever be tied to Bianca Morrelli. She obeyed, and I dried her legs and between her thighs.

“Nico,” she whimpered, her legs wobbly.

“I want to know every inch of your body,” I said, pressing a kiss to her mound. “Every freckle, every line, every birthmark.”

A strangled laugh escaped her. “Could you learn it later? Right now, I want you inside me.”

My lip curved into a smile. “Turn around and press your palms against the mirror.”

No hesitation. God, it made me hard just to see her obey me like this. I raised to my full length and our eyes met in the reflection of the mirror. Towel discarded, I came up behind her and pressed my mouth to the base of her spine.

“Ohhh,” she whimpered. A visible shudder ran down her back. I trailed my lips down her spine, marking her skin with my tongue all the way down to the crease of her ass. Reaching around, I slid my hand up the inside of her thigh, opting to finger fuck her.

She moaned loudly, the noise vibrating against the tile.

“Don’t come until I allow it,” I ordered her. Her ass pushed back, grinding herself against me.

My fingers still inside her slick folds, I took my free hand and smacked her ass. Her eyes flashed in surprise, her mouth parted into a silent O, but she didn’t move. Rubbing my palm against the reddened flesh, a soft, barely audible moan left her lips, and she pushed her ass harder against my palm.

Fuck! She loves this.

Not letting her catch her breath, I plunged my fingers inside her as I smacked her ass again. And again.

“Nico,” she whimpered. “Please.”

I thrust my fingers into her, pumping in and out, and landed another slap against her ass.

“Fuuuck!” she screamed as her pussy convulsed around my finger. Her legs trembled, and I wrapped my arm around her chest, holding her upright.

“I told you not to come,” I said harshly, biting into her earlobe as she came down from her climax. Watching her was exhilarating. Nothing would ever get me hard again, except my wife.

“More,” she whimpered. “Give me more.”

Without a warning, I removed my fingers and drove my cock deep inside her. Her head fell backwards, leaning against my shoulder. I lost all the sense of reality, as I pounded into her, grinding against her ass.

“Has anyone taken your ass?” I grunted, thrusting into her. She arched her back, taking all of me. My body covered her back, pinning her with my body against the mirror and my teeth clasped on her neck. I slid back and forth in her wet pussy, our friction building like flame.

“N-no. Nobody.” I watched her face in the mirror, her pale skin flushed.

My hand came around, rubbing her clit. “So fucking wet.”

My finger wet with her juices, I went for her darkest, most forbidden hole. Gently, I massaged her wetness into the skin at her back entrance. When she didn’t pull away, I pushed one finger into her. Her pussy clenched around my cock.

“That’s right, Cara Mia,” I crooned.

Her body yielded to me and my finger slid into her as I thrust my cock into her pussy.

“Oh my God, Nico!” she cried. Her breath caught in her throat, and her hand came around, her fingers digging into my ass.

“Harder,” she gasped. “Fuck me harder.”

I reared back, only to slam into her again.

“I’m going to fuck your virgin ass.” Jesus, I was losing my mind.

“Yes, yes,” she panted. I couldn’t wait to take her ass. *Soon!*

With my cock in her cunt, my one finger in her ass, I slid my other hand down her flat belly and reached for her clit, circling it.

“You feel so fucking good,” I hissed. The white-hot pleasure tingled in my spine, threatening to burst, and I ground my teeth holding back. Her pleasure would always be my priority.

“Come for me,” I commanded. “Now.”

“Nico,” she screamed out and her pussy gripped my cock in a chokehold as she found her pleasure, her eyelids closed and her mouth parted. “Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck.”

I followed her right over the cliff, finding my own release and my cock jerked and spurted into her hot pussy.

Her breathing was ragged, her cheek pressed against the mirror. She was magnificent. I had a feeling she would reach all my limits.

Slowly, I withdrew out of her, watching my cum leak down her legs. Damn, I wanted her pregnant with my babies.

The moment we pulled up at Bianca’s place in my black Land Rover, Cassio and Luca came out, pissed off looks on their faces. I expected it.

Oblivious to everything, Bianca fumbled with the door, eager to get to her daughters, but I got to her side faster. I opened the door and she got out, rushing across the lawn.

“Ten minutes, Cara Mia,” I called out after her.

“Yeah, yeah.” She threw me a playful glance. My wife was definitely not a morning person. But after our morning activities, her spirits lifted. We both moaned and groaned

through that ordeal. Nothing started off a day better than making your wife happy in every and any way possible.

“Still here?” she asked Cassio and Luca as she passed them by.

“We wanted to see you again,” Luca mumbled, folding his arms in front of him. “Make sure you don’t want us to kill your husband.”

Luca smirked my way, and I gave him a middle finger. Bianca glanced over her shoulder and a soft smile played there.

“No, not today,” she answered, her eyes traveling down my body. “I kind of like him in those jeans.” Then she shook her head, as if trying to shake off her thoughts. “That ass,” she muttered to herself, and I had a feeling she meant to think it, not say it.

Still, I grinned. If I had to, I’d use my body to make her fall in love with me.

Inwardly I groaned. *Fucking hell, I’m starting to sound like a chick.*

“Ugh, gross,” Luca grumbled. “I don’t want to know what that means.”

When I got dressed, my wife’s mouth parted in shock, her eyes darkening on me. It took all my restraint not to drag her back to bed and fuck her hard. She muttered something about my ass and sins. Regularly, I wore suits, but after her reaction and hungry eyes on me, I’d make a point of wearing jeans more often.

Bianca disappeared into the house, passing Luciano on his way out. He probably wanted to ensure Cassio and I didn’t kill each other.

“That was a stupid move,” Cassio gritted, the moment the front door closed behind Luciano, locking the women inside.

I flickered a glance his way. “I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

I wasn’t surprised Cassio found out about the message I sent to Benito. He had spies among his father’s men that kept him apprised of things. After all, the whole underworld was buzzing with the newfound news on Benito King’s daughter. If Bianca was single, she’d be a sought after commodity. As it stood, she was mine.

Luca leaned against the house. “You realize he now wants her? You might as well have put a mark on her.”

“He had a mark on her already,” I told him. “He was going to sell her to the bratva. Now he knows she is mine and can’t fuck with her. Every motherfucker on this planet knows it.”

“Fucking wrong,” Cassio spat furiously. “He saw her married yesterday. It was his confirmation he couldn’t sell her.”

“No, that picture I sent him will ensure he can't sell her. Because she is mine. It is evidence of a consummate marriage and warning to anyone I’ll come for them if they only look her way.”

Cassio let out a frustrated sigh. “Nico, he always wanted a daughter. And now he found out he’s had one all along. What the fuck do you think will happen to Bianca’s mother?”

“I took care of it,” I told him.

“How?” Luciano asked. “That woman has been his favorite mistress for over twenty-six years. He wouldn’t let her go for anyone.”

“I had Alexei get her mother. Once I had confirmation from him that he had her, I sent my message.”

“So you take his favorite woman and daughter,” Luciano replied. “His granddaughters. Did you think about them? He’ll fucking burn down cities and states until he gets his hands on all of them.”

“He will never get his hands on them,” I assured him.

Cassio’s jaw ticked and his eyes darkened. Cassio and Bianca had a few similar mannerisms, and they didn’t even

grow up around each other. I'd never point it out since Cassio hated anything that made him resemble his father.

"And Bianca?" Luciano questioned. "What will you do when she finds out? You've seen the video, she believes her father was that man on the screen. It will do a number on her."

"She'll never know."

"What the fuck, Nico?" Luca growled. "News travels. You know that better than anyone. You can't keep her locked in your goddamn estate. "

"She won't be locked up. Guarded and safe, yes." Bianca moved in different circles. I had no intention of taking her to any fucking mobster events. The men she met at our wedding would be it, and I'd beat the crap out of every single one of them if they leaked a word. Friends or no friends.

"I fucking swear, you are as stubborn as a mule when it comes to my sister," Cassio spat out. Annoyance unfurled in my chest that we were even having this conversation. I wanted to take my family and get them home.

Bianca's mother would be there by the time we returned. I had sent Alexei Nikolaev and his men after Bianca's mother, to retrieve her. I didn't want her mother to pay the consequences of my revenge. I knew it would be one thing Bianca wouldn't forgive me.

"Fuck," Cassio muttered. "You love her." It wasn't a question, but a concise and clear statement.

"What?" Luca sounded shocked. "What the fuck did you two do last night?"

I swear I wanted to punch Luca and beat his face against the blacktop.

"Nico, this seems uncharacteristic of you," Luciano tried to smooth the situation. "You were always the methodical, reasonable one."

"I'm reasonable, and the three of you fuckers need to back the fuck off." Luciano shook his head and I grunted.

“Isn’t that what you told everyone when it came to your wife, Luciano?”

“Point taken,” he acknowledged, tilting his head.

“How long have you loved her?” Of course, Cassio wouldn’t let it go. He and Bianca had that in common, stubbornness and a temper.

“I won’t discuss the relationship between my wife and me with you guys,” I told them. I could be just as stubborn. “I’ll keep them safe.”

From the moment I spotted Bianca, even before I learned of her connection with Benito, I wanted her. She was the only woman that ever managed to take my breath away. When life threw her my way again, I became obsessed and cursed my destiny. She was a married woman. I would have never touched her, even if I knew her husband was a cheater.

Would I have still used her in my revenge? Yes.

But the second I heard the words of her husband’s illness, as I stalked their home from the bay in the middle of a storm, I knew our lives were forever intertwined. She was mine and nobody would dare to touch her or her daughters.

“Stubborn motherfucker,” Luca muttered but the discussion was concluded.

Just as I was about to go inside, all our cell phones beeped. Sliding the message open, I cursed under my breath.

“We’ve been hit,” Luciano announced.

“Us too,” Cassio said, fury lacing his voice.

Three sets of eyes came to me.

“Me too.” We all knew who coordinated it. “Benito is on the move,” I told them, dialing up Leonardo. It was expected Benito would retaliate, but I hoped he’d leave out Luciano, Cassio, and Luca.

He answered on the first ring. “We’ve been hit. Bratva with that motherfucker King.”

We knew which King family members he was talking about - Benito and Marco.

My free hand clenched into a fist. “What’s the damage?”

I fucking hate criminals without a code pissing all over my territory or stealing my product. It just ruined my mood and my day. And it started off so good.

“Five dead bodies, entire shipment of goods. Fifty million. But we got one of them alive here. Sings Russian real nice.”

“Good,” I snapped. “Keep him alive until I get there.”

I hung up, seething fury cursing through my veins. Bianca was my wife, this was my town and my territory. If Benito thought he did a number on me with this hit, he had another thing coming.

“I’ll compensate the three of you for the damage,” I told the men that have been my closest friends for a very long time. The only one I’d ever choose above them was Bianca and our kids.

“Don’t worry about that shit,” all three of them responded. “We got it covered.”

These men always had my back. I never had to worry about one of my best friends going rogue.

“No matter what, Nico,” Cassio warned. “You keep her and her kids safe. Luca and I will stay around a few more days. The Italian Ambassador is having his annual gala. I want to make sure Benito doesn’t get his paws on those Amalfi properties. I just have to give the old ambassador an incentive to invite Luca and I.”

“Bianca already got us invited,” I told him.

Cassio and Luca looked shocked. I didn’t blame them. The Italian Ambassador has been a tough nut to crack. He played nice with me, but only because of my vast real-estate portfolio and my legitimate side of the business that rivaled top companies in the world. But I knew he was on Benito’s payroll.

“How?”

I shrugged. “He liked her. We’ll go together.”

“Do you think Bianca will mind if we stay here a week?” Cassio asked. “That way we can keep an eye out on the house. I won’t be surprised if Benito tries something. I want to be close-by if something happens.”

“I’ll tell her you two are nosy motherfuckers, and it is either here or with us at our place. She’ll choose here.”

Cassio and Luca flipped me a bird at the same time.

“Luciano, are your men driving home with you?” I asked him. I didn’t want anything happening to his family. He went through hell himself to get them back.

“Yes, we are good.” Luciano came beside me and put his hand on my shoulder. “Before I go, I’ll say this and you won’t hear another word from me.” I arched an eyebrow at him. “When Romano killed my mother and sister, I was furious. You’ve seen me. I used Grace against them. But the one that paid the highest price was my wife. I lost her for three years. Don’t repeat my mistake.”

“I am not repeating the same mistake,” I said wryly. I made a promise that I’d keep her safe, so I would. Until my dying breath. It was my commitment to her and myself. And I haven’t broken a promise yet.

Bianca and the twins were under my protection now.

“Don’t worry,” Cassio added sarcastically. “If our sister runs, we’ll help her.” Then his mouth tugged up into a slight smile. “Though I have a feeling we’ll have to put up with Nico as a brother-in-law for the duration of our life.”

I glanced at my friends and shook my head. Cassio and Luca would forever be protective of Bianca now, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Less risk that anyone could get to her and our girls. It made our family stronger.

Luca rubbed a hand over his jaw, the look in his eyes full of mischief. “Bianca will stay with Nico only because she likes his ass in those jeans.”

“Stop talking about my ass and let’s focus on your father and Marco.”

“Agreed,” Cassio said.

“Bene,” I muttered. *Good.* “We better bring Benito and his empire down once and for all.” Cassio and I locked eyes. The ball was in his court to start moving things along.

After everyone’s muttered agreements, we went into the house to get the women and children.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

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BIANCA

The girls chatted the entire time in the back seat, telling us all about the night they had. There wasn't a single second they forgot. If they did, they would have gone back and explained it all over again. We even heard the detailed description of their dreams. Basically, all their chatter summed up to Matteo, Cassio, and Luca. The latter two surprised me, but my twins seemed to be enamored with Uncle Cassio and Uncle Luca. Apparently, they decided to call Cassio, Luciano, Luca, and Massimo uncle. Nancy, Grace, and Ella were just… well, Nancy, Grace, and Ella.

Cassio and Luca would stay a bit longer at my place, so I've asked them to lock it up. I sensed something happened while the men were outside, but it was hard to figure out what. Probably some stupid mob stuff. Nancy went back to her husband this morning, before we got there, and I hoped we'd see her soon.

Before we left my house, I fixed a cup of coffee. For Nico and myself, though he seemed unaffected by the lack of sleep. My body was enveloped in the sweetest exhaustion. I couldn't even put into words what had happened last night and this morning. I didn't dare. I felt like up until last night,

I was a virgin and knew nothing about sex, nor me. I never even dreamed it could be so explosive being with someone.

Nico held my hand as he drove, using his thumb to make a soft pattern on my skin. I loved his touch, and I found the circling motion of his thumb on my skin to be comforting. William hated holding hands, and whenever I'd try to make him, it felt awkward, so I usually gave up. But with Nico it felt natural.

He drove smoothly and sure, responding to the girls' comments and questions. It was almost a perfect family moment. I tried not to dwell on the future and just enjoy this moment now.

Nico's phone rang again, but he ignored it. My eyes flickered to him, curious why he was ignoring his phone calls.

Despite everything, I found myself venturing hesitantly into unfamiliar territory. I knew we wouldn't be married for a long time due to the Belles & Mobster agreement. I couldn't let the twins be dragged into that but while I was around him, we couldn't just limit our entire relationship to sex. Though, it was freaking amazing. The best sex ever. Addicting.

"Is everything okay?" I asked slowly.

His thumb never stopped making the pattern on my skin, but I sensed he was tense, agitation and anger rolling off him in waves.

"Just some work stuff," he replied. "Nothing for you to worry about."

Yep, definitely mobster shit. Because if it was his legal business, he wouldn't be so tight lipped.

We drove through the gate and the girls' gasps were audible from the back seat. I had known they'd be impressed, even at their age.

"Does it have a playground?" Arianna asked. "If not, I want to go back to our house."

I smiled softly at her. "I don't know, but I saw a pool."

“Wow,” they both murmured in awe.

“There is a playground here too,” Nico explained. “I haven't had a chance to show it to your mom yet because we were busy.” My cheeks colored with the image of what we were busy doing. Our eyes met and he knew exactly what went through my mind. “I meant it was dark,” he added, chuckling.

I rolled my eyes at him.

The moment the car came to a stop, both Nico and I got out of the car and each got one girl out. The girls’ feet hit the ground, and they started running up the stairs, excited to see their new home. It made me feel shitty to know that I’d have to uproot them again soon, but I shoved all that deep down. There would be plenty of time to dwell on it when the time came.

Bear and another guard were right behind them.

“You guys go ahead and show the girls the playground. We’ll be right there,” Nico told them.

Nico took my hand and we walked up the stairs like a happy, newlywed couple. Oh, how appearances could be deceiving! The two of us had so many secrets swirling around us that I wasn’t even sure how we could ever function as a couple - even if you took the threat of Benito and the belles’ arrangement out of the equation.

“I have to leave for a few hours, but before I do,” he started, “I have something or someone to show you.”

Hesitantly, I glanced at him unsure what he would want to show me.

“Okay.”

In the daylight, Nico’s mansion was even more grand. Against the blue skies, the whole place shone like a palace, white marble stark against the green lawn and the blue skies.

This whole estate looked like an escape from reality. A reality that was surely coming, with each passing second that ticked by. My growing sense of dread was hard to

ignore. But I had to hide it behind a façade. Nico was too perceptive, and I worried he'd see the deceit on my face.

While Nico spoke to his friends outside, and after I greeted the girls, I excused myself to my bedroom to use the restroom. It was a lie. I went into my safe and took documents I would need once we ran. My grandmother's family had a secret place in Italy, on the coast of Amalfi. We'd start there.

Planting his hand at the base of my spine, he guided me to the left wing of the house.

"My office is this way."

I nodded and we continued in silence, until we walked through an open doorway. My step faltered. Alexei Nikolaev stood in Nico's office and an alarm shot through me. He had done nothing but been nice to me, but for some reason, each time I saw him, my self-preservation kicked in. He was scary as shit. One look in his pale eyes, and I saw so much darkness in them that it shook me to my core. He mostly wore a grim expression although I saw him smile once at his sister. From what Isabella explained, there was some complicated family history there.

It would seem we all had a past and shared complications.

"Nico," he greeted us. "Mrs. Morrelli."

I guess that was me. "H-hello," I stuttered, taking a step closer to Nico.

My husband tugged my arm along, tucking me into him and went to shake his hand. Nico's movements held a note of authority, concealing his ruthlessness and killer instinct beneath his expensive clothes. Alexei Nikolaev, on the other hand, wore it like armor and a badge of honor. It was probably easier to steer away from the likes of Alexei than Nico, though they were both made out of the same cloth.

"Thanks for the favor, Alexei."

"All good," he said, tilting his head to the opposite side of the room and my gaze flitted that way.

For a moment, I stood there, feeling disoriented. I blinked my eyes, sure I was seeing things.

“Mom?”

I hardly recognized her. Every single visible surface of her pale skin was blue and purple, yet she sat there, immobile with her back rigid and her eyes dead. I just saw her less than twenty-four hours ago.

“H-how… w-what?” My thoughts scrambled in my brain, trying to process that my mother was here. She was in a bad shape, really bad shape. A bolt of fear shot through me, pulling myself away from Nico, I ran to her sitting form.

I did this to her.

“Mom!” I sobbed, taking her cold hand into mine, lowering myself onto my knees.

My heart raced frantically while I inventoried her state. The mundane observation of my mother’s battered state constricted my heart, making it hard to breathe - a split lip, swollen cheek, pale neck with purple finger marks, cuts, and cigarette burns.

Her eyes met mine, beautiful blues of the sea clashing with my dark gaze. I always wished I inherited my mother’s blue eyes. After I found out about my real father, I wished for it even more. I hated any resemblance I had to that piece of shit.

She lifted her hand and cupped my cheek with it, her touch soft. Her face was a bruised mess.

“Lui sa.” *He knows*. Her split lip made her words sound off but there was no mistaking the meaning.

“W-what?” I stuttered in fear.

“I’m so sorry, Bee,” she muttered. A single tear trickled down her face, as if she cried so much in her life, she had no more tears to spare.

“No, I’m sorry,” I whispered, my words twisting into a sob and wrapping my arms around her frail body. I should be sorry, not my mother. She endured twenty-six years of abuse for me.

I'm sorry for the pain I caused you, for being conceived by that asshole, for being born, for your sacrifice, and most of all, I'm sorry for not saving you.

But all those words got stuck in my throat. I couldn't get them out, not with the witnesses in the room.

Turning my head, I met my husband's and Alexei's eyes. I should thank them but my throat hurt so bad, I couldn't utter a single syllable to save my life right now. So I just nodded, biting hard into my lip so I wouldn't start crying. My mother needed me now.

A silent acknowledgement by Alexei Nikolaev and I knew, no matter what, I'd never shy away from him again. Nico and Alexei saved my mother.

Nico came up to me and pressed a kiss on the crown of my head. I knew he didn't want to leave, the sentiment was written all over his face. But I was glad he was leaving, because I couldn't talk openly with my mother with witnesses around.

"Will you be okay taking care of your mom while I handle a few things?" Nico asked. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Bear knows to keep the kids busy and his wife came over with their kids so they'll be wrapped up with them."

"I- I can't greet them right now." My voice was coarse, full of emotions.

"Don't worry about that. You stay with your mother. The twins are safe."

"Okay," I whispered, my eyes back on my mom's frail form. Each time our eyes met, the same thought hit me straight to my chest. *She's dead inside.*

Tears stung in the back of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall.

"You ready, Alexei?" Nico's voice was still in the room, but I didn't look behind me.

"I'm ready to break some assholes," he retorted and I sensed his rage had something to do with my mother's state. I wasn't used to physical threats, but I'd be a liar if I

said that right now, I hoped they were talking about hurting the man that hurt my mom. I wanted Benito King and his men to pay for the pain he caused.

“Call me if you need something, Cara Mia,” Nico’s voice was soft. “Gia will come and show you to your mother’s room. She takes care of the house and will get you whatever you need.”

He told me about Gia earlier. She basically ran this household for Nico.

“Thank you.” I looked over my shoulder, meeting his dark cloudy gaze. *He saved my mom.*

That single act made him my hero. All his other sins I could forgive because he saved my mom.

“Be safe,” I told him. *And come back home safe*.

Nico had crawled his way into my heart.

Gia was Godsent. She was somewhere between forty and fifty-something, I couldn’t quite decide. My mother’s age possibly, and I liked her. Her eyes were dark and kind, gentle smiles always shining through them, albeit I had a feeling she had experienced hardships. While we were helping my mother, she let it slip that her hair has been gray since her early twenties.

Hard life, she remarked.

She helped me carry Mom up to her room, then assisted with cleaning out her wounds. I had never done this before, but it was clear Gia had. Once we got my mom cleaned up, showered, and then bandaged her wounds, Gia handed me two painkillers to give to Mom. I had never been so grateful for another person in my life as Gia at that moment. A few times, she even went to check on the kids, snapped a few photos and came back to show me they were having fun.

As my mother dozed off, under the influence of painkillers, I looked at Gia who sat in the chair opposite of mine.

“You’ve done this before,” I claimed.

She nodded her response. “A few times.”

“On Nico?” I knew nothing about the man, his past.

She smiled. “That man is too stubborn to let someone else patch him up,” she replied with a small smile. “He usually gets himself cleaned up. Unless it is too bad that he needs a doctor.”

Something twinged inside me at the thought of Nico being hurt. I didn’t like it at all. I knew so little about him. For Pete’s sake, I didn’t even realize his parents were still living until they showed up at our wedding.

“Who did you patch up then?” I asked, trying to get the images of Nico hurt out of my head.

“His sister was the last one,” Gia’s voice was hoarse, making me seek out her eyes.

“Nicoletta?” Surprise flashed in her eyes, but she nodded her answer. Somehow despite the fact that Nico and I didn't have weeks to get to know each other, he knew how important my mother was to me. And I never said a word to him. I wanted to make this work if Mom was with us. Maybe we could help his mom too. We could be a family. We’d have to talk and get to know each other better, but maybe…

The hope bloomed in my chest. It felt like a good beginning to our marriage and future together. But Benito King had to be eliminated. He had to pay for all the hurt and death he caused - for Nico and his sister, for my mother and numerous other victims. Maybe Nico could help me?

“She died a little over three years ago.”

There was sadness and anguish in her voice, just like with Nico. She must have loved his sister too.

“Nico told me a little bit,” I whispered. I took my mom’s hand in mine, holding it tightly, scared of any possibilities

of losing her.

Gia's eyes watched my mother, but I knew she was seeing someone else in her place. Nico's sister.

"An evil man, a colleague of Nico's father, got his hands on her," she croaked. "Had her beaten and r-" She couldn't finish the word, but I knew what she meant. *Jesus Christ!* "Nico couldn't get past it. Blamed his father for it, even his mother. But most of all, he blames himself. He wanted Nicoletta living with him, under his protection. But she loved her mother. Insisted on staying with her."

Kind of like I blame myself for my mother's suffering.

Silence lingered with the last of the sun rays coming through the window. I kept looking through the door, hoping the girls would come. Same with Nico.

I wanted to get my girls in bed, see them fall asleep. Assure myself we were all safe.

"I can stay with her," Gia must have sensed my struggle. "Go to your girls. They'll be in the kitchen right now." I looked at my mother's sleeping form. "She won't wake up till tomorrow. I won't leave her."

"Okay," I caved in to my need to see the twins. "I'll get them tucked in, and then I'll be back."

"You come back and check," she agreed. "But I'll stay with her all night. You need sleep."

"So do you," I protested.

"I get plenty of sleep," she retorted dryly. "Besides, I can only sleep two-three hours a night. Then nightmares from long ago come back."

So many broken people. Yet, after so long, ever since I lost my grandma and dad, it started to feel like I had a family.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

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NICO

I pulled up in the back of one of my deserted industrial warehouses; Alexei right behind me in his Maserati. I drove my Land Rover, the car seats in the back reminding me I had so much more to lose now.

After my sister died, it was the same to me whether I lived or died. The only incentive was my revenge. But now, I have so much more. I wouldn't let history repeat itself. I'd protect those girls, Bianca, her mother, and my mother. It took Bianca coming into my mother's life for her to finally wake up.

She didn't go back to my father. She checked into a rehab center. Once she was cleaned up, I planned on having her live on my property. Eventually, I'd talk to Bianca about it. Right now, she had her own worries that she had to focus on.

Alexei had found her mother in bad shape. He got to her before my text went out, so I couldn't understand what prompted the outburst.

"You good?" Alexei asked. It is rare to see any emotion cross this man's face. He had a fucked up childhood, more so than most. Some things were impossible to come back from.

Like Nicoletta's death.

Like Bianca’s mother crossing paths with Benito King.

For Alexei, it was his first twenty years of life.

The scars remain for life, some raw no matter how much time goes by. It was the reason I intended to keep Bianca sheltered from it all. I didn’t want to see the shine in her eyes shatter at learning so many filthy truths.

This crapshoot called life was a bitch. But with Bianca, I found myself breathing again. Living again. Yes, Cassio was right. I was obsessed with his sister.

“Yes,” I answered his question. “Just want all this shit done with. Kill the bad guys, have kids, see them grow up safe and happy, die old with a woman by my side. Without the Benitos of the world fucking it up.”

Alexei’s eyes darted to the docks of the warehouse. “That would be nice. Though, aren’t we the bad guys too?”

Well, he had a point there. But I’d like to live, thank you very much. I needed my wife, burying myself inside of her was heaven. If there was a heaven, I had found it.

“Stop raining on my parade, Nikolaev.”

Leonardo waited for us, our happy visitor already bawling his eyes out. Leo was right. He was singing in Russian. Carrying a note too.

“I hear you are the lucky one that survived,” I greeted him. The coward didn’t know whether to look at Alexei or me. “Let me introduce myself. Nico Morrelli and guess what, you piece of trash?”

“W-what?”

He reeked of fear and piss.

“You stepped foot on my territory without my permission.” I pointed the gun between his eyes. “And stole my shipment.”

“It wasn’t me,” he pleaded. “It wasn’t us. It was Benito. And Marco.”

I was surprised to hear that coward son of his actually dared to venture out.

One and the same. “But you worked with him. Didn’t you?”

“We don’t want your territory,” he rattled. “Or the shipment. Just the girl.”

He better not be thinking of my girl.

“Who is *we*?” I wanted no misunderstandings when I started killing these assholes.

“Vladimir Solonik’s men.”

“And who’s the girl?”

“Bianca Carter.”

“Ahhh, wrong motherfucker,” I gritted, barely holding back my rage. “It is Bianca Morrelli, my wife.”

His eyes widened, I was sure they’d bulge out of his head and we’d find eyeballs rolling around our feet.

“Benito said it is Bianca Carter.”

“I guess you didn’t get the memo,” I told him.

He shook his head. “Benito promised the girl to Solonik ten months ago. She is part of the arrangement.”

This guy was a joke.

“What arrangement?”

“The belles’ arrangement.” *Not this shit again.* Though somehow, I wasn’t surprised. Alexei and I shared a look.

“Go on,” Alexei urged him in Russian, hoping to put him at ease. I suspected I already knew; it had been nagging at me ever since I learned about her grandfather’s gambling debt.

“The Catalano family signed an agreement for three generations of belles. Every other generation of a female descendant of the Catalano family from the coast of Amalfi. Benito swapped the generation of Bianca Carter for her mother. But that’s not fair. It should be two more generations owed. Vladimir wanted Bianca. The Solonik family counted on that coastline. It came with the wife of a Catalano descendant.”

Or a daughter.

“And Bianca Carter-” he quickly corrected himself, “… Bianca Morrelli owns property on the Amalfi coast. Her mother had it transferred into her name.”

Fuck. Me.

Did the fucking entire underworld know this?

I’d stake my life that Benito wouldn’t attend the Ambassador’s gala. I just handed him the gateway to the coastline. He wanted Vladimir to be caught, so he could renege on the agreement.

Fuck!

Did my hunger for revenge blind me, or was it the craving to make Bianca for my own?

I slid the knife into his stomach. The rage at Solonik, at Benito, and most of all, at myself was gutting me from the inside, mirroring the knife I wrenched upward, spilling the guy's guts all over the floor.

My first instinct when I saw her all those years ago was right. She didn’t belong in my world and was too good for it. Yet, she was mine now.

Kicking his lifeless body down, along with the chair, I turned to Alexei.

“I’m impressed,” he murmured. “You didn’t need me.”

“Years of practice.”

It was a true statement. The killer mindset was required by anyone living in this world. Otherwise, you just didn’t make it. After Nicoletta died, I killed every single man that dared touch her, except Benito. But he would die too. Very soon. If not by my own hand, then by his sons’.

“I am so sick and tired of hearing about the Belles and Mobsters agreements.” I suspected it, but the Amalfi coastline I didn’t see coming. The last records pulled up showed her grandmother as the owner, to be turned over to her mother. My wife being part of the fucked up arrangement run by the King family infuriated me.

It didn’t matter. Now, I had to protect her and her girls.

“Tell me what you need,” Alexei offered.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

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BIANCA

He knows.

Benito learned the secret my mother kept all those years.

Everyone was in bed. I checked on Mom again and she was out cold. Gia wouldn't take no for an answer, so I returned back to the bedroom I shared with Nico. After a quick shower, I found a corner on his balcony overlooking his vast estate.

The air was cool while I sat on the balcony of the master suite. I didn't notice it last night, but today I had a bit of time to explore Nico's bedroom after Gia sent me out of Mom's room. I sat on the chair, wrapped in a blanket, trying to gather my thoughts. The exhaustion felt heavy in my heart and my body but sleep would be pointless. There were too many worries whirling inside my mind.

It felt safe here with forest in the distance that surrounded us and numerous men guarding the place. Yet, I knew we couldn't live here and never leave this property.

I was unsure what the right thing to do was. Would Nico protect us when he found out about my connection to Benito; that I was the daughter of the very man that killed his sister? I wanted to believe so. After all, he was friends with Cassio and Luca.

If Mom, the twins, and I were to run, we needed money and for Mom to get better. Gia assured me that she'd start healing, and in a few days, she'd be able to move without any pain. The question was whether we had a few days. Maybe I should stick with the plan that my mother and grandmother always pounded into me. Run. Dad made me promise to run when Benito found out I was his daughter.

He didn't say if he found out; it was always when.

If that was the case, we'd have to run very soon then. This week.

I wanted to scream my pain at the stillness of the night. It wouldn't do me any good though. The cool air and the darkness masked the sound of my breaking heart. I knew we'd go our own separate ways. It was only yesterday that I raged at my husband. Now, something in my chest constricted every time I thought about not seeing him.

Was it possible to fall for a man that fast? To feel such a wide range of emotions in such a short span of time?

Whatever it was, I would miss him. I recalled the first time I saw him, when I was back for the summer, after my first year of college. I didn't know who he was but Nico wasn't a man that you'd forget easily. He dominated the room, his aura easily capturing the room. He had the same impact on me that night when I was in downtown D.C. with some girlfriends and John. I only shared a fleeting glance with him, but it took months to forget the handsome stranger.

Angie, John, and I danced to the beat of the music, the fancy nightclub overcrowded. The rest of our friends danced right around us. We laughed so hard at John's dance moves. Going out with him was always a hit. But hours of dancing made me overheat. It was too hot.

"Let's grab a drink," Angie yelled over the music, pulling me with her to the bar area.

"Sure!" I yelled back.

I started to make my way across the room, but realized too late Angie went back to dancing with John and the girls.

“Ugh, little traitor,” I grumbled under my breath but continued to the bar.

Once I ordered the drinks, I stood in front of the bartender, as he made them. I let my eyes scan the room, and that was when I saw him.

His eyes connected with mine, and it was like a jolt of electricity. He sat in a private booth, with several other men, but there was no mistaking it. He was looking at me.

Wow. Just fucking wow.

He was the best looking guy I had ever seen. Older than me. But so dangerously handsome.

Dark suit. Awesome body. Dark hair. Mesmerizing eyes, but I had a hard time seeing their color from all the way here, and I wished I had an excuse to get closer. And his sharp, handsome face with the perfect five o’clock shadow.

I didn’t know who he was, but I knew he was important. Just by the way he sat there, like the entire world was at his feet.

It was after my lunch with Angie that I thought back to that night in the club. My mysterious man from the nightclub was Nico Morrelli. He fueled many of my fantasies before William and I got married.

Destiny.

My grandma believed in destiny. It sure felt like Nico was mine. The odds that we would have run into each other again should have been slim to none. Yet, here I sat in his mansion, as his wife.

Should I trust my destiny? I wanted to. After all, he saved my mother. Maybe he could protect all of us.

“There you are,” Nico’s voice startled me out of my memories.

He took a seat next to me before pulling me onto his lap. Without thinking about it, I wrapped my arms around his neck, soaking up his warmth and security.

He felt like my security blanket.

“Everything good?” I asked him.

“It will be.“ It sure sounded like a promise. He inclined his head and pressed his lips on mine. Immediately, my eyes fluttered shut, feeling delicious sparks sent through every cell of my body. “How is your mom?”

“She’s resting.” I snuggled deeper into his warmth. The man was a living, walking heater. “Thank you for saving her.”

“I’ll always save you, Cara Mia.”

I love this man. Was it supposed to happen fast like this?

I pushed my fingers through his dark hair. It was thick and soft. There were so many things I wanted to tell him, but I could sense he had a hard day already. It would have to wait a day. The troubles wouldn’t disappear and he needed rest.

“You were right.” I changed the subject. “I owe you principal on six hundred thousand dollars.”

He raised his eyebrow. “What made you think of that?”

I shrugged, letting my hand caress his scalp. “It popped in my head. You didn’t lie. I was an idiot.”

He took my face in his hand, bringing it close to his. “I will never lie to you. There might be information I omit, but I will never lie to you.”

I swallowed, feeling stupid. “I believed him when he said he ended it,” I murmured. Oddly enough, it didn’t hurt, and I suspected it had something with this man in front of me. “Don’t omit if you decide… to-” I stumbled over my words.

“I will never decide on any other woman. You are it for me, for the rest of my life.” He pressed a hard kiss to my lips. “And I better damn well be it for you, because I’ll kill any man that touches you.”

A hiccup escaped me and then a giggle. “So romantic.”

He grinned, and suddenly it made him look so much younger. “That’s me. Romantic kind of guy.”

Pressing my lips against his tan neck, I inhaled deeply. His scent had become such a familiarity. A comfort.

“You know the first time I saw you,” I started, pressing light kisses on his neck and then alternating to licks. “… was when I was nineteen, during my summer break.” He stilled and I sought out his eyes. “In a nightclub.”

“Yes?” he said tersely.

“Yeah. A group of us went dancing. Angie and I went to grab a drink,” I rolled my eyes at that. “She ditched me before we got to the bar area.”

“It was the first time I saw you too,” he confessed. *Destiny*. The word buzzed in my brain. “The moment I saw you, everything in me shifted.”

“Why didn’t you ask me to dance with you?” I teased softly. But I knew if he would have, this man would have swept me off my feet a long time ago.

“Because though I didn’t know your name, I knew you were too good to be dragged into my corrupt world.”

Despite being the underworld boss, Nico was a good man. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have thought twice back then to drag me into his world. He would have taken what he wanted regardless of the cost.

“I didn’t know who you were,” I murmured. “Though if I had known, I might have sought you out. Because I had quite a few fantasies about you.”

We stared at each other for a moment, our admissions shifting the air between us.

“I should have been a selfish bastard and taken you,” he admitted. “But I knew that I wouldn’t have let you go.”

“And here we are,” I whispered.

“Here we are.”

It had been two days of bliss. Mom had been recovering, though she hadn't said another word. I felt a strange sort of contentment. Nico along with Cassio and Luca seemed to constantly have meetings. I assumed something bad happened, but oddly enough, I felt safe. I was playing a dangerous game, putting the odds of Mom's, the twins', and my safety in his hands.

Trust was a concept that was natural to me until just recently. I trusted my mom, dad, and grandma implicitly. After I found out the family secret, the trust became cracked, but I understood why they did it. Dad used his last breath to explain it. But William might have shattered it.

However now, I found myself trusting Nico.

"What are you cooking?" Nico's voice came from behind me, and I whirled around. It was barely five o'clock and I had given the chef a day off so I could prepare dinner myself. Nico has had some long days, and he surprised me by being here earlier today.

His arms wrapped around me and without thinking, my body leaned back into him. His strength was always comforting.

"Just a simple dinner," I told him. "Filet mignon with red potatoes and asparagus. It's the girls' favorite."

"Hmmmm," he gently nibbled my ear. "Mine too."

"And for dessert, I made chocolate mousse. Hope you have a sweet tooth."

His hot breath on my neck sent shivers down my spine.

"Only when it involves you." My husband was insatiable. So was I when it came to him. It was a completely new feeling. I never considered myself particularly sexual, until Nico entered my world. Now I was acting like a sex crazed teenager.

"How was your day?"

"Better now that I'm home," he said, his teeth gently nipping at my earlobe. God this man, I could never get enough of him.

I cleared my throat, so he wouldn't see how badly he impacted me. "Have you checked on your mother?"

He told me Nancy checked into rehab and wanted to get clean. I was happy for her and for him. It meant a lot to Nico to have his mother back in his life.

He glided his hand downward, brushing against the side of my breast, and tracing it down my hips.

"She's recovering well," he drawled, his voice soft. "Now, I want to hear your moans, not your questions."

Jesus. My ass ground into his erection, as a moan passed through my lips. I ached so badly for him. He gathered up the hem of my dress to my stomach, his fingers brushing over my soaked panties.

"I want to make you come now," he said roughly, his voice hoarse in my ear.

His scent was all around me, the dinner forgotten. I moaned louder as he circled my clit through the thin material of my panties.

"Nico," I breathed out. "Someone might come."

The wetness pooled between my thighs, the pulsing ache driving me crazy. He slid my panties to one side and delved deeper; his raspy low curses whispered in my ear. His finger thrust into my pussy and my stomach clenched.

"Bianca-" Gia's voice came through our haze of lust, and we separated so quickly, my front bumped into the stove. Nico quickly pulled me backwards so I wouldn't get burnt.

I cleared my throat and flicked a glance his way. There was a satisfied smirk on his face, as he pressed a kiss on my cheek.

"Later," he promised and my cheeks flushed, just as Gia showed up at the doorway.

"Am I interrupting something?" she asked.

"No."

"Yes," Nico answered at the same time, and my cheeks must have turned crimson red.

Gia grinned knowingly, and I'd hate to even guess what she was thinking. "I was going to ask if you want me to set up the table?"

"Sure, the girls can help you. Everything should be ready in twenty minutes."

He stood behind Gia and our eyes met. His finger lifted to his mouth and he sucked it clean, then pushed his hands into his pockets. If Gia would have turned around at that moment and saw him, I would have died of embarrassment.

"I have a quick call to make, and then I'm all yours," he gave me a lazy smile. "I can help too."

As he walked away, my eyes swept over his ass that looked too good in a pair of dark slacks. It just wasn't right for a man to have such a fine ass.

THE KIDS WERE ALL TUCKED IN, MOM WAS IN BED AFTER TAKING her meds for pain, and Gia retired for the evening. Nico and I tagged teamed the girls, and it made bedtime so much faster.

Quickly cleaning the kitchen so Nico's chef wouldn't find it a mess, my mind was lost in the past. It had never felt like this with William. He rarely tucked the girls into bed, regardless if he was home or not. Nico always helped when he was home.

"I'm ready," Nico's voice had me jumping, startled.

He leaned against the doorframe, arms folded and his eyes predatory on me.

"For what?"

He stalked towards me, a smile on his beautiful, handsome face.

"What are you doing?" I eyed him suspiciously with that grin on his face. He was up to something.

“I’m ready for my dessert,” he purred and something about the way he said it had me look at him twice.

Did he mean-? Or was he talking about the mousse I made? No, he made it sound way too suggestive to mean the actual dessert. Right? My skin heated, it seemed to happen a lot around this man.

I swallowed hard. “The chocolate mousse is in the fridge,” I replied, my voice husky.

He chuckled darkly. “We both know I’m not talking about the mousse.” Okay, now I was on fire. If I started fanning myself, would that feed the fire? Maybe a cold shower. “Take your panties off, wife.”

His body had me cornered against the kitchen counter. I glanced around, there wasn’t a single soul around. After we tucked in the twins, it seemed all Nico’s staff dispersed. But they could come back any moment.

“Here?” He couldn’t be serious. He pinned me against the counter, one arm on each side of me. The metal of his wedding ring clanked against the counter, a reminder I belonged to him.

“Yes, here.” There was nothing on his face that betrayed his desire. Except for his eyes. Those heated with something dark and sexy. “Now.”

“Someone will see,” I barely choked out, my heart pounding under my ribs. I was excited, turned on unlike ever before. “Shouldn’t we go into the bedroom?”

“If they want to live, they won’t see a damn thing,” he replied darkly. “And we are staying here. I want you to think about me every time you cook, every time you bake.” He wanted to mark every corner of this house, so I couldn’t escape the memory of his hands on me. Not that I could anyhow. “I need those panties, Bianca.”

Straightening up, my body stood flush with his. His eyes were hungry on me, watching my every move. I shimmied my panties down my legs, glancing around again to ensure

nobody was nearby and then quickly shoved the panties into his extended palm.

“Here,” I muttered exasperatedly and turned on like never before. This man drove me nuts.

“Now get on the counter,” he ordered.

“Why?” I squeaked. Surely he wouldn’t do this here.

“Cara-” he purred with a dark threat in his voice.

“Fine, fine.” My back against the cabinets, I hopped up on the counter, never breaking eye contact with him.

“That’s my good wife,” he commended and something inside me melted at his praise. I needed someone to slap me hard. I loved pleasing my husband. “Now, pull the dress up to your hips and open your legs. I want to see how wet you are.”

I swallowed hard, my insides burning. He’d find me wet. It didn’t take much for this man to turn me on. All he had to do was look at me, and I’d melt or burn to ashes. A trickle of desire ran down my inner thighs.

Slowly, I took the hem of my dress and pulled it up and opened my legs wide, my pussy exposed to him. The counter was cool against my scorching skin.

I might have been open and half naked for him, but there was something so damn powerful seeing his eyes turn dark. The stoic, cold man turned into a hungry wolf.

He might dominate my body, but I dominated his desire.

“Are you just going to stare?” I breathed out, my pussy pulsing with the need for his touch.

“Want me to eat your cunt?” he rasped, his hungry eyes never looking away from my sweet spot.

“Cunt is such an ugly word,” I muttered. I always hated that word though coming from Nico’s mouth it sounded more sexy than demeaning. It would seem everything about my husband turned me on.

He still hadn’t moved, so I reached out my hand and brushed my finger across my clit. Fuck, I was wet. It wouldn’t take long to get myself off.

“Would pussy sound better?” he asked in a hoarse voice, the vein in his throat throbbing. He was just as impacted by this as I was. It gave me the extra courage I needed. My fingers skimmed over my throbbing clit, and it felt so good. Not as good as his touch, nothing ever felt as good as Nico. “I want your pussy for dessert.”

A little noise of pleasure left my lips at hearing his dirty words. His big hand wrapped around my wrist, forcing me to stop fingering myself. He brought my hand to his lips and slowly sucked each finger clean, making hum noises deep down in his throat.

“Nico, I-” God, I might orgasm before he even touched me. My insides shuddered and my pussy ached for him.

My restraint was non-existent when it came to this man. I reached up with my other hand and curled my fingers through his hair, tugging him closer. There was no sense denying myself. I wanted him.

Releasing my hand, his lips came down on mine, firm but soft. My hands reached out behind him, gripping his shirt, needing to touch his skin. I responded to his kiss like a starved woman. He made a wild noise in his throat and his tongue moved faster, harder, twirling with mine. My husband knew how to kiss.

He pulled my dress, crumpled around my waist, over my head, breaking our kiss. My bra followed, leaving me completely naked under his gaze. His warm hands skimmed down my body, my breathing heavy with anticipation.

“Brace yourself.” He nodded to my arms. “I intend to take my time eating my dessert.”

Holy fucking shit!

I set my arms behind me, palms down on the counter. His mouth came down to my throat, licking, kissing, nipping and a throaty moan sounded through the kitchen. Then his mouth moved down, licking me from my neck down my body. My entire body threatened to explode, shatter into a million pieces.

“Nico, please,” I begged, my head tilted back and my eyes closed. This man made my body burn. The ache between my legs intensified with each second that ticked by.

“Cara mia, open your eyes.” His voice was hoarse, desire thick in it. I forced my eyes open, watching him through my heavy eyelids.

Wolf. He stared at me hungry like a wolf.

My body shivered with anticipation as he pushed my thighs further apart, the look in his eyes starved, reflecting how I felt.

Lifting his starved gaze, our eyes locked. “Your eyes on me. See how starved I am for your pussy,” he growled low and set my body into a full-blown inferno. This had to be the sweetest hell.

His head lowered down between my thighs, the stubble on his face scratched my soft skin and the moment his tongue touched my entrance, his mouth closing on my pussy, a loud moan echoed through the empty kitchen.

Nothing had ***ever*** felt so good.

His mouth and tongue worked magic, sending shockwaves throughout my entire body. I bucked against his mouth, my back arching into him.

“Fuuuuck,” I hissed breathily.

The deep rumble in his throat sent a vibration through my body. My breaths came in faster and faster, my panting loud. Good God! I wouldn’t survive this.

Both my hands grabbed his head, as if scared he’d stop, my fingers gripping his soft hair.

“Don’t stop,” I begged. “Please… Oh, God.”

The way my body responded to Nico’s touch was exhilarating, intoxicating. His tongue slid inside me, a humming noise vibrating through every single fiber of me. The way he made me feel was magical. I panted so hard, my ears buzzed, and I made noises I had never heard myself make before.

Nico bit my clit, *hard*, and my body shattered, my mind spiraling out of control. He didn't let out, licking hard, lapping every drop like it was the last drink he'd ever get.

This man was my fire. The fire quickly became inferno - dangerous and deadly.

Breathing heavily, I watched him through half-closed eyelids. He straightened, his chin glistening with evidence of my arousal and feral hunger in his eyes. His hand brushed against my cheek, and I had to fight the urge to rub my face into his big palm. He was still dressed in his three-piece suit while I sat on the marble kitchen counter naked.

Without a warning, his hand reached behind, fisting my hair into his grip. Not hard, but firm enough to control me.

His mouth clashed down on mine, his tongue pushing through my lips, the kiss hard and possessive. My body was sensitive from the orgasm that just shattered me, and he was setting off the flames all over again.

My hands frantically reached for the buttons on his vest, eager to have him naked. I needed to feel his skin under my palms, feel his heart under my fingertips. Once every button on the vest was unbuttoned, I shoved his jacket and vest off his shoulder and both fell soundlessly on the floor.

Next, I fumbled with the buttons on his shirt.

"Fuck, why do you wear so many clothes?" I mumbled, frustrated.

He ripped the shirt off, buttons flying all around the kitchen but neither one of us cared. Both of our hands reached for his belt at the same time. Our gazes met, burning desire in both of us clear as day. Or night, in our case.

Lowering my eyes, I watched his big forearms next to my small ones. The ink on his tanned skin stark against my light skin. I reached for his hands, my fingers wrapping around his tattooed wrists, and slowly removing them. I half-expected him to stop me; he didn't. Encouraged by it, I

went to work on his belt and zipper, pushing his suit pants off.

He didn't wear boxers, as usual, and his cock sprang free. I had never seen something so erotic. This man's body was a work of art, making me greedy for it.

His pants fell onto the floor, the belt clanking against the tile. He kicked the pants off along with his shoes, then followed up by his socks. This man was gorgeous. With a capital G.

My eyes trailed from his tanned, muscled legs, up his torso. His hard cock was beautiful, making my mouth water. I had never particularly liked giving a blowjob. But with this man… I loved doing it. It felt empowering to have so much control over his pleasure.

Everything about this man's body was perfect. My hands trembled as I reached for his rock solid abs, my fingers skimmed along his six pack, trailing the tattoo of the feral wolf. Nico's skin was hot, just as I imagined the fur of a wolf would be. For the first time since we got married, it felt like I finally got to learn my husband's body in an unrushed manner. In the kitchen, of all places.

I lightly traced the ink on his collarbone that creeped just slightly up his lower neck. The petals of a flower, a rose. So different, opposite from the wolf. It was beautiful, and the meaning behind it made my heart ache. For his loss.

My hand opened and I pressed a palm against the right side of his neck, his pulse thundering under my touch. The ache between my legs intensified again, begging to be eased. I was greedy for him, only for him.

Raising my head, our eyes met. There was something feral in the depths of his eyes. Feral and sadness, mixed in the gray stormy seas. Before I took the next breath, his hand wrapped around my wrist and pulled it off his body. His other hands grabbed my ass and lifted me off the counter.

“What-”

His mouth swallowed my question. Several strides and he had me pressed against the wall. My legs wrapped around his waist, holding on. Taking both of my hands, he raised them above my head, pressing them against the wall.

“Don’t come until I say so,” he said against my mouth, his voice hoarse. “And keep your hands above your head.”

His hands came down to my soft hips and in one swift move, he entered me brutally, filling me to the hilt. He pushed his hips, filling me even deeper and I hissed out a breath. He lit me up, like a match to gasoline.

“Ti possiedo,” he rasped hard.

“W-what?” My brain was in scrambles.

“I own you.” His voice was rough, his mouth greedy on me. A deep part of me wanted to tell him off but the bigger part of me only sought out pleasure that I knew he could bring me. “Ti domino.”

That one I understood. *I dominate you*. And God did he ever!

He moved my neck to the side, and I hissed when he bit my collarbone. He immediately followed by sucking at the skin there. He moved, pumping in and out of me, hard and ruthless.

A soft whimper escaped my lips, with every slip of his hard shaft pushing in and out of me.

He moved faster, pumping in and out of me, overwhelming me.

“I will never let you go,” he vowed, his voice thick with feelings. Though I couldn’t distinguish them. He pulled out of me and then came back in with full force. “You are mine. We made a vow in blood and in front of God… you are mine forever.”

He overwhelmed me. The meaning of his words as he pumped hard into me took me higher and higher. The

intensity of each thrust brought me closer and closer to the surge I needed.

“Nico,” I called his name, breathless.

“Don’t come yet,” he ordered and my mouth parted, a silent scream on my lips. Forgetting about his earlier command, my hands left their position above my head and wrapped around his back. Holding on to him like my life depended on him, my nails dug into his flesh hard and my back arched.

I was so close. I wouldn’t be able to hold it. But I wanted to please him. I clenched my pussy, my insides tightening around his hard cock as he thrust relentlessly.

“Fuck,” he gritted. “Cara Mia, you will break me.”

I panted, welcoming each thrust, the pleasure building, ready to break the dam. “Please, Nico,” I begged, my blood on fire.

His hand reached between our bodies and his finger found my clit, pinching it hard.

A scream left my lips and the dam shattered under the force of current into tiny little pieces as a wave of intense pleasure surged inside of me. He moved even faster, hitting me even deeper and I cried out, white lights flashing behind my eyelids.

I watched him through my orgasm, his muscles seizing, his eyes burning, setting every inch of me on fire.

“Bianca,” he growled out my name and spilled himself inside of me, his fingers digging into my flesh. Seeing the orgasm break him, just as it broke me, something inside my chest split. There was no escaping him, no hiding from him. Two bodies became one, two souls danced in the clouds, sharing in the pleasure that somehow felt special.

Did he feel it?

He buried his head into the crook of my neck, both of us breathing hard in the silence of the night. He didn’t pull out of me; he didn’t move away. It was just us.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

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NICO

Things have shifted between Bianca and me over the last week. For the better. It had been almost a week since we'd been married, and I was the happiest I've ever been. We fell into a routine. Each morning she rose with me, though I told her to sleep in. She'd sit and sip on her coffee as I got ready, chatting about her plans for the day. Then she'd hand me my own coffee and walk me to the garage. Most of the evenings we'd eat dinner together, as a family, and then we'd tag team getting the kids to bed. She'd take care of her mother with Gia.

Then it was just the two of us for the night, until we'd both sprawled naked across our bed exhausted and sated. It was the same thing each night; she'd snuggle into me and doze off. I had never felt so content and happy. She made me insanely happy.

If only the threat of her father was eliminated.

Cassio and Luca sat in my office while I stood by the window watching the scene outside.

Sofia, Bianca's mother, was slowly recovering. Today was the first time Bianca took her outside. Though per Gia and Bianca, she hadn't spoken a word about what had happened to her. Bear's wife, Bianca, and Gia sat with her chatting. The kids played a little distance away.

“Should we go to the ambassador’s gala or not?” Luca questioned.

I shrugged. “We could. In case Benito and Marco decided not to put all their eggs into one basket.” My gaze flitted to the two brothers. “But Bianca is not coming. It’s too risky.” They immediately nodded in agreement. They wanted to keep her safe, just as much as I.

Benito wanted to get his hands on Bianca for several reasons, thanks to me. She was his daughter, she owned a piece of prime real estate on the Amalfi Coast, and she had two daughters of her own. The biggest driver was the property in Italy, albeit having a daughter came in as a close second. His dreams of allegiances with powerful families came true with having a daughter, except that I fucked it up for him. I married her first. As was my plan, but I hadn’t counted on Bianca being the owner of the property Benito wanted.

I was fucking pissed off that the property transfer never came up in any of the background searches. It was the reason he kept her mother as his mistress for all those years. Yes, she was his favorite but there were more reasons for it than just Sofia’s beauty. Sofia Catalano was his longest standing mistress.

The coastline of Amalfi was spoken for and owned by the most influential Italian crime families. It was a rarity that happened maybe once every two hundred years that something came on the market, and usually it was snatched before the *For Sale* sign hit the dirt.

The Amalfi Coast has been the best smuggling secret amongst the mafia criminals and pirates of the world. I owned a good piece of it, thanks to good old Dad. Bianca’s family owned an even bigger piece, in fact the biggest piece of it. The family of Bianca’s grandmother was one of the few that passed on the property to their daughter that migrated to the States who ironically wanted nothing to do with the criminal activities. It was meant to allow their

family to get out of the underworld with their property on the Amalfi coastline intact but Bianca's grandfather fucked it up when he gambled.

The King family didn't own any of it. But they've wanted in on those properties for a very long time. Tonight a slither of the coastline would be sold at the gala to the highest bidder. Benito was the only bidder. I suspected it was the reason Benito was so eager for Sophia Catalano.

"Nico, what's done is done," Cassio said for the tenth time.

"We have to kill Benito," I croaked. "Otherwise, with that property being in Bianca's name, he'll never give up."

"Why did it skip her mother and go directly to Bianca?" Luca asked.

Her mother wanted to keep it out of Benito's reach, but she never thought it through. She counted on Bianca being left alone since she traded places with her daughter. She should have known Benito didn't keep his promises.

"It was her mother's request apparently. She let him believe it was transferred to her per her mother's will, but she had it directly transferred to Bianca. She didn't want Benito to force her hand. By doing that, unknowingly, she put Bianca back on the market. She counted on Benito to play fair, but that bastard never plays fair. He was going to sell her to Vladimir through the Belles and Mobsters arrangement and the two agreed to split the property."

But why share when he could take it all now that he knew Bianca was his daughter!

"Is it really that large?" Cassio questioned.

"The largest. It can accommodate twenty cruise ships easily."

Chucking my cell onto my desk, I took the seat at my desk. I leaned back in my chair, kicked my heels up and lit up a cigar. Luca and Cassio were already on their second. It was a relaxant, but Bianca hated the smell so I'd been

avoiding cigars. I'd have to take a shower before I even touched her.

"Any of your contacts have any information on what happened to her mother?" I asked Cassio.

He shook his head. "She still hasn't spoken?"

"No. She's in bad shape," I told them. Her bruises were healing but something about the way her eyes stared empty, dead. I wasn't sure if that woman would ever come back from the hell she'd lived through.

"Anything on the attacks?" Cassio asked, switching to the subject of recent events.

"I have a theory, but there aren't any facts to support it," I finally said. There was a thought brewing in my head for days.

"What is it?" Cassio asked.

"The attacks on the warehouses," I started. "They were too sloppy and too easily pinned on Vladimir's men. What if Benito tried to use us to kill Vladimir to break off the agreement he made with him once he learned Bianca was his daughter? Why share if he could have it all to himself, as her father."

Cassio leaned onto his elbows that rested on his knees, processing what I just said.

"Possibly. It kind of sounds like the way he thinks," he murmured. "He's a greedy bastard and probably wants it all for himself."

"Does it even matter?" Luca questioned. "Neither one of those two bastards would get their hands on my sister."

"We can use it to our advantage," I told him. "Get Vladimir to turn against him, bid against him at the gala. The fact that his men didn't know that Bianca was married nor Benito's daughter tells me Benito is manipulating him to get his way."

Cassio was still processing it all. "I have a contact amidst the Russians. Sergei, one of the Russian Sinners. I'll

ask him to see if he can find out how much Vladimir knows."

I blew out a smoke ring, the nicotine swimming through my bloodstream. "Yes, let's do that. Fast."

I was eager to obliterate Benito and all his allies.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

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BIANCA

I was getting antsy. I couldn't pinpoint what drove it, but I couldn't stop the feeling that something important was brewing, and I was willingly burying my head in the sand. Maybe it was Nico's request not to leave the compound, to keep the kids within the perimeter of the house. Maybe it was that I still haven't found the right way to tell him the dangers surrounding my mother, daughters, and me with the belles' arrangement. We had gotten closer; we talked, but there were certain areas we never delved into.

His sister. Benito King. And our feelings.

We even talked about John, and he agreed to help him out. I was certain I'd have to remind him since the agreement was given after I gave him a blow job, but the next day, John's text came, thanking me. He was rebuilding his company with Nico's input and help.

The days were getting colder, so instead of playing outside, I parked myself in the playroom Nico had created for the girls. The windowsill seat was comfortable and big enough to seat two adults. I stretched my legs out and read the same page for the hundredth time, then finally gave up.

Glancing out the window, all I could see was the vast estate that became a gilded cage. I didn't fight Nico when

he told me to remain on the compound. After all, Mom said that Benito learned I was his daughter. Staying here, behind the safety of these walls, seemed the only option. But for how long?

The girls would eventually have to go to school. Right now, it didn't matter whether they missed a day or months' worth of daycare. But it would matter when school came. They already started questioning when they would go back to see their friends.

The playroom door opened and to my surprise it was Mom. I quickly stood up and went to her.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes." My eyes snapped to her. Her voice was hoarse but there was no mistake. She had spoken! It was her first word to me since that first day. "Can I sit with you?"

"Yes, of course."

I held her hand as I walked her over to my spot on the windowsill. Her bruises were fading and hopefully another few days, they'd be gone.

The twins were used to the fact I had a mom by now. For the first few days, they were freaked out - by her battered state and the fact I had a mom. It was the most time I have ever spent with my mom in all my twenty-six years. It was easy to get used to having her around. Maybe because when I was a little girl, I often found myself talking to my mom in my head. I'd imagine her responses and have a full blown conversation.

Yeah, it probably wasn't healthy, but it was my way of dealing with things.

If she wouldn't have traded her life for mine in the arrangement, she would have been a completely different person. Even now, thinking back to all the times I've seen her, I had never heard my mother laugh. Ever!

I knew nothing about her, but I loved her. I didn't know her favorite food, flower, color, or hobby. Nothing! I just know that she was twenty when she had me and whatever

Grandma told me when she found the strength to talk about her. Because it hurt her too.

Guilt ate at me every single day since I learned about the belles' arrangement and why she had done it.

"Benito knows you are his," Mom's voice shattered the silence.

"I know," I rasped. God, how I hated that man. It wasn't healthy to despise someone so much. That man has caused so much pain to so many people. Cassio and Luca, his own sons, Nicoletta, my mother… these were just some of the people he hurt.

"Mom, Benito's sons," I started hesitantly, "Cassio and Luca. Have you met them before?"

She slowly shook her head off. "They happened before me. Their maternal grandfather raised them." It was probably a reason they turned out okay. Though they couldn't escape the mafia life. "Their grandfather comes from a powerful Italian family. All I know is that Benito hates them."

That man had some serious mental issues. Those two were total badasses; they should just kill the asshole. It would make all of our lives easier. If we ever get a suggestion box, that was totally going in it. Anonymously, of course.

"Why would you marry someone like Benito?" Her question caught me off guard. My head whipped to the side to find her dead eyes on me.

I didn't think Nico was like Benito. Yes, they both did illegal shit, but Nico had some scruples and standards when it came to crime. Didn't he? It wasn't as if I checked nor had time to run a check. Grace and Ella mentioned all the men fought human trafficking and having them in control of the East Coast, they saved many women and children.

God, I sounded stupid to myself. Crime was crime, no matter how you painted it. My grandmother's words, not

mine.

“It’s a long story,” I ended up saying. He forced me to do it probably wouldn’t bode well for the future of our family relations. Then on the other hand, I didn’t think she would appreciate my admission that I fell in love with him and loved having sex with his fine ass. Yes, my mother didn’t need to hear this. I had to help her heal, not scare her.

“He knows you are Benito’s,” she murmured, looking back at the twins.

A sharp gasp sliced through the room.

Tick-Tock. Tick-Tock. I could hear a clock somewhere in the room ticking, my heart racing against it.

“He does?” My voice sounded little more than a rasp.

“Yes, he sent a note to Benito,” she said slowly, softly. “Benito’s daughter for his sister.” My breath caught sharply. Hurt was ripping through me, leaving me wide open. Deadly silence filled the air as I waited for her to say something else. Anything else. “It was the only reason Morrelli sent that man to get me. To get me out before a message was sent to Benito by your husband, letting him know you are Benito’s daughter.”

The deceit.

The lies.

The revenge.

Finally, I understood why he wanted to marry me. He knew who I was, knew my value to his enemy. I should have known. He told me himself he always found out everything, went for the throat. Utter devastation flooded through me, the stillness of my mother emphasizing my husband’s betrayal.

“H-how do you know about the text then?” I rasped. “If you were already gone.”

“Another mistress,” she said, her eyes devastatingly empty. “We were close.”

Jesus Christ. How many women did that man keep?

I swallowed. “Were?”

“Benito killed her yesterday.”

God, this silence was deafening. And the buzzing in my ears refused to ease.

“A-are you sure, Mom? Maybe someone else sent the message to Benito.” I lowered my gaze, ashamed. I was desperately hoping, against all odds, Nico wouldn’t have been so cruel.

“Yes, baby.” Her voice was even. “Nico Morrelli told Benito you are his.”

There was no hiding from the truth. I let a man who betrayed me in the worst way possible into my bed, and my heart. The criminal who was no better than Benito.

My husband.

My deceiver.

My sweet demise.

I couldn’t even find the anger within me. A sour taste in my mouth mixed with sorrow. *This hurt*, I had to admit.

There goes my hope again.

“Greece is nice this time of year,” Mom whispered so low I wouldn’t have heard it if she wasn’t sitting right next to me.

“Yes, the skies are blue and the seas are stormy,” I responded on auto-pilot, my voice low.

Looking back, I should have known he would have dug it up. After all, he owned Cassidy Tech. He even told me himself when he went after something, he never eased up until he succeeded.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” I croaked. I felt a piece of me die. “I’ll get us out of this.”

It was my turn to care for her.

I STAYED UP WAITING FOR NICO, AS USUAL. I DIDN’T WANT TO change my routine or raise any flags.

He worked late. He and Cassio had to get ready for the ambassador's event that was coming up. That was perfect, because I had to prepare for my own event.

I sat in one of his one seater sofas, my knees curled up and a book in my lap. I was still on the same page as earlier. It was pointless to try and read today. My mind was too wound up, but it helped to keep my hands from picking my nails apart.

"Hey Cara Mia," his deep, raspy voice reached me, and I followed its direction. There he was. My beautiful manipulator. I presumed you had to be to survive in the mafia.

My father killed his sister. Nico knew I was Benito's daughter. It seemed appropriate he would use me in his revenge. *Jesus Christ!* The words of Nico's father on our wedding day made complete sense now. I couldn't even blame Nico for scheming up his revenge plan against Benito. Though I wasn't sure that Benito was the one suffering now.

Forcing a smile on my face, I greeted him. "Hey. Long day at work, huh?"

The look he gave me made me wonder if he saw through my pretense. If he did, he didn't say it.

"Too long of a day without you and the girls," he answered, as he strode over to me, lifted me off the seat, then sat himself in it with me onto his lap.

I could almost believe his deceit.

My body warmed at his closeness. To be in his arms… damn, it felt like home. My one hand supported against his shoulder, I reached up to cup his cheek. A stubble felt rough under my palm. Just like this man. Rough, ruthless and… not mine.

"My mom spoke today," I told him.

Surprise flashed in his eyes. "Finally," he murmured. "What did she say?"

I leaned in to shower his neck with kisses. It was a calculated move on my part. To hide my face as I told him my lie.

“She wants to leave the country,” I murmured against his skin, kissing his pulse. “Start somewhere fresh, away from everyone.” Snaking my hands underneath his suit jacket, my hands brushed against his gun. He hadn’t taken it off yet.

“We can help with that,” he murmured, his hand wrapping around the nape of my neck, his fingers digging up into my hair as he gripped it. He angled my face away from his neck, his lips crashing against mine. It was always the same with him. His hunger matched my own. I parted my lips, letting him in, his warm tongue dancing with mine and the ache between my thighs intensified with each second.

I peeled myself away from his face, breaking the kiss. I didn’t want to lose all my sense until I got what I needed.

“She needs travel documents,” I breathed hard. “Fast.”

He nodded and stood up, then put me back in the seat. I already missed his heat. It was amazing that another human being could so easily become an extended part of you.

“I have a contact we can use,” he offered. “I’ll send it to you and just send him the info, and when he has it ready, he’ll deliver it to one of my men.”

No, he’ll deliver it to me. I’d iron that out directly with the contact.

I stared as my husband strode over to his painting.

He reached up and pulled on the frame of the painting, revealing a safe hidden behind it.

I watched, holding my breath, as he entered a long code and then the safe door opened. He pulled his gun out of his holster and put it inside on top of some documents, and stacks and stacks of money.

Runaway money.

It would be enough to make us disappear. Averting my eyes, scared that he'd see the plan in them, I watched through the windows, seeing the dark of the night. My heart thundered and my nerve endings threatened to jump out of my skin.

The next second, my phone buzzed, which made me jump.

"Just sent you the guy's contact information," Nico said. A rush of relief hit me with his words. My plan was plausible. "He'll know who you are and can get the stuff done within the same day."

I couldn't believe it was that easy. A part of me objected to being so sneaky and dishonest, but I shoved it deep down. It wasn't as if anything started with honesty in this relationship.

Pushing my guilty conscience aside, I stood up and walked over to him.

"My destiny," he murmured against my forehead. "I'll always find you, Bianca. Because you are my destiny."

Destiny. It was odd timing to bring it up.

My heartbeat flipped at his words, burning them into my skin and my soul, as his lips lowered to mine. The kiss was soft and sweet and heartbreaking.

Life had a cruel sense of humor.

His palms came to my face and he held my head, observing me with scrutiny.

"Is something the matter?" Nico was too perceptive. So I distracted him the only way I knew how. My hands reached for his tie and I started undoing it. I lifted onto my toes and kissed him gently. Usually we were too hungry for each other to take it slow. Right now, I wanted it slow, to savor every single second of my beautiful deceiver.

I darted my tongue across his lower lip, nibbling it gently. His tongue took over, engaging in a feverish dual with mine. He sucked on my tongue, his erection already pressing against my belly.

Just kissing with Nico Morrelli was erotic enough to make me burst into flames. I was already so wet for him, the moisture pooling between my legs, soaking my panties. Discarding his tie, I worked on getting rid of his jacket and then fumbled with the buttons, eager to feel his skin against mine.

Our slow kissing worked up and became a starving need. We kissed like it was our first time, our last time. Desperation and hunger in every touch and kiss. There was never somewhere in-between with us. The hunger was too strong. I pushed my body against his, needing his warmth. Even knowing his betrayal, I wanted him. I loved him.

Was it fucked up? Maybe, but I couldn't control it any more than my heritage.

I love you. The words whispered in my mind, wanting out, but I kept them locked.

His grunting and my moans mixed in the stillness of the night.

"I need to taste you," he said in a guttural voice, his strong hands tearing at my dress. I watched him through my heavy eyelids, panting. My bra followed, and his eyes darkened into gray pools.

A deep, guttural noise erupted from his throat. "Your tits, wife," he said. "Your body. All mine."

The reverence in his eyes, the desire and lust… it was searing into my soul. I wanted it all for the cold future I would have without him. He stood there all male, the outline of his erection hard against his suit pants. He was magnificent, his shirt half-way unbuttoned, the tattoo of the wolf peeking underneath it. A perfect mixture of a gentleman and savage.

Discarding the material on the floor, his eyes never wavered from me, burning with desire and igniting my own into a volcano. In one sudden move, he ripped my panties next.

“To my desk,” he ordered. Without hesitation I went to it, ready to hop onto it but his voice stopped me. “No. Bend over it.” I did, the cool surface against my breasts sending goosebumps down my flesh. I turned my cheek to the left, watching him behind me.

Dark hunger inflamed my senses and I pressed my palms flat, gripping to the edge of the table. My body ached with need as Nico traced his one finger down my spine, his gaze burning my skin.

“Are you going to fuck me or just stare at my ass?” I muttered, taunting while hot lava burned through my veins.

Smack.

My body jolted forward at an unexpected move.

“Don’t taunt me, Cara Mia?” he chided.

I wiggled my ass, grinding myself against him.

Smack.

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned. I clenched my legs together to hide my arousal, but Nico noticed it. Of course, he would notice.

“Open them,” he ordered. My legs spread open, my ass at his disposal and evidence of my arousal clear for him to see. I glanced over my shoulder in time to see him kneel down.

“Jesus, Bianca,” he muttered, his breath hot against my sex. “You bring me to my knees every fucking time. I’ll never have enough of you,” he admitted, his gaze fixated on my glistening sex.

I never knew a woman could orgasm from words alone, but with this man, I could. A look from my husband and I could combust into flames. The moment his hot tongue lapped my sex, instantly an orgasm shattered through me.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, pushing myself against his tongue, riding the wave. I shouldn’t be this sensitive anymore. I had had more sex in the last week than I’ve had in the last two years. Yet, it was different and new every time with Nico.

He stood up to his full length before driving two fingers into my sex, and instantly I convulsed around his fingers, needing more of him.

“So wet,” he murmured. “Is that for me?”

“Yes,” I panted. “God, Nico. Please.”

He removed his fingers from my pussy and traced backward, stopping over the forbidden hole. I shifted away, but he quickly reprimanded me with a sharp smack.

“Don’t move, wife.” I instantly stilled and his finger started massaging my wetness into the soft skin of my back entrance. His finger slid into me and a shiver ran through my body.

I pulled away again. *Smack.*

My ass cheeks burned with the sting but at the same time, I felt good when he rubbed his palm over it.

“Do you know why the punishment?”

“B-because I pulled away?”

He slid his finger into my back entrance *again*. “No, Cara Mia,” he crooned. “If you want me to stop, I will. Just say the word.”

Did I want to say the word? I didn’t think so. His finger was too big but it felt so good. So damn forbidden and good.

Smack.

“Fuck, Nico,” I cried out. “Just fuck me already. I can’t wait anymore.”

Smack. He chuckled darkly. “This is turning you on,” he stated. He was right, but it felt wrong to like this so much. “I’ll fuck you. Soon. But first… tell me, wife. Why am I punishing you?”

I waited holding my breath, worried that somehow he read right through me. *Does he know?*

His finger slid deeper, working me and my body responded grinding against him.

“Answer me, Bianca.” Fuck! I should fight him but instead my body decided to melt for him and each punished

slap he delivered onto my ass made me more turned on.

I looked over my shoulder, my husband's hard body poised behind me. He was still dressed for Christ's sake, and I was panting here, grinding against his finger in my ass.

"Because I stole from you?" I whispered.

He chuckled darkly, his eyes a molten gray cloud ready to thunder through me.

"No, Cara Mia," he purred, landing another smack on my ass. My arousal trickled down my inner thigh. "You are getting punished because you took what's mine." I blinked in confusion, watching him. I haven't taken the money out of the safe yet. What was he talking about? "You touched what's mine."

"W-what are you talking about?" I couldn't think like this, my entire body on fire and his finger in my ass.

"You touched yourself in the shower," he purred and my eyes snapped to him. How did he know that? After the girls were in bed, I took a shower and started thinking about Nico, the morning after our first night together and I lost the battle. I reached between my legs and tried to get relief.

"H-how-" I took a deep breath in. "How do you know?"

"Our bedroom's surveillance is directly connected to my phone." I gasped in shock. "Just my phone." He slid a finger deeper into me and my body tensed. "Your body is mine to touch and to fuck, Bianca. Only mine. Your orgasms are mine and mine alone." A shudder danced down my spine and desire pooled between my legs. God, I have never heard a man talk like this. Then his hand grabbed my hair and tugged my head backwards so he could lock eyes with me. My scalp protested in pain but my body didn't care. It obeyed him. His big body covered mine and he pulled my head more to him, pressing a hard kiss on my lips.

"Did you come all over your fingers?" he asked. I shook my head. "Did you come?"

“No,” I rasped. “I tried but couldn’t get off.” It would seem only my husband could get me off these days. He let go of my hair and his hand reached around my body to circle my clit. “Oh God, Nico.”

Every nerve in my body was too sensitive, he slid two fingers into my core, delving into my wetness and then spreading it down and up my folds.

“There is no city, country, or planet you can run to that I wouldn’t find you. I want your everything, wife.” I should protest, fight him on it, but instead my ass ground against his finger and his erection. He wanted too much and my stupid body was willing to submit to his every whim. He slid his finger out of my forbidden hole and the sound of a zipper lowering cut through our labored breathing. “And you have my everything. I want your every heartbeat, every breath because fuck it if I am going at it alone.”

You are my heart, my heart screamed. I wanted to tell him how easily I have fallen for him, but the words remained sealed in my soul.

“Nico,” I panted, unable to control this hunger. “I need you inside me. Please,” I begged.

He drove his cock deep inside of me, and instantly the throbbing ache intensified.

“Yes!” I screamed.

My core tightened around his length inside me and he started grinding into me. Hard and ruthless, each thrust driving him so deep and hitting my G-spot.

“Nico, Nico,” I chanted. There was nothing at this moment, just us and this pleasure he was giving me. His powerful thrusts jolted my body forward, and I gripped the edge of the desk. Every thought in my mind disintegrated, leaving only him. I only smelled him, felt him, heard him. Each time he drove deep inside me, he hit that sweet spot, taking me higher and higher. Delirium swam through my brain, getting me drunk off of him.

“Give me your mouth,” he demanded, his voice hoarse. I turned my head, his body against my back and his mouth crushed against my lips, kissing me possessively. The kiss was messy, sloppy, and hungry as his body powered forward with brutal thrusts.

Pleasure built higher and higher, the heat of him against my back creating the addictive friction I would need forever. My stomach muscles coiled, my pussy clenched and my orgasm shattered through me, taking me higher and higher. At the same time, Nico groaned long and deep into my ear, his hips jerking against me as he spilled into me.

His forehead against my shoulder, his body pressed against my back, our breathing intermingled through the silence. His hot breath laced the nape of my neck, the air around us smelled of sex and sweat, and our hearts beat as one.

“Mine. You are all mine, wife.” *Yours.*

My master manipulator had shattered me into a million pieces.

“Gia, could I leave the girls with you for a few hours?” I asked. “Bear will go with me and my mom. We have to get some stuff for Nico.”

Lie.

But I hoped it would prevent her from sending him a note. There were a lot of *ifs* in my plan, but so far, things were working out. The moment Nico left the bed this morning, I sent a note to his contact. Three hours later, he had the documents ready. I guess it paid to have the last name Morrelli.

“Of course,” Gia’s reply was ready and fast.

“Thank you.”

I went in search of my mother and found her sitting outside by the pool, staring into nothing. Her body shivered with the cold, but it was as if she didn't even notice it.

"Mom," I rushed to her side. "You can't sit out here in just a thin dress. It is barely forty degrees."

Her eyes came to me and ice-cold fear shot through me. *Empty.* Her eyes were pools of nothingness. No despair. No sadness. Nothing. Her beautiful eyes were blank and dead.

"Mom?" I called out softly, my throat choking with emotions. She blinked but the rest of her body remained motionless. I put my hand around her shoulder. "Let's go inside. I have to leave for a bit, but you can't stay out here."

Her head turned my way. "I'm coming too."

I shook my head. "No, it is best if you stay here. I'll be back soon."

"I'm coming too," she persisted, her eyes a blue void. I had a bad feeling about it. Something wasn't right with my mom. I should have called a doctor or a therapist to talk to her. "I'm coming, Bianca," she repeated.

"It's safer if you stay," I tried to reason with her. Maybe the fact she was adamant about coming with me was a good sign. Damn it, I didn't know.

Her lips thinned, and I recognized the stubborn trait.

"I am going with you. Finito." There was no passion in her voice, but I knew deep down, there was no dissuading her.

Ten minutes later, Mom and I drove through the gate with Bear driving us in some boxed armored looking vehicle.

Both of us stared out the window, leaving the silence lingering. She knew the plan, I knew the plan. After Nico left, I snuck into his office and tried opening the safe, relying on my memory. It took me a few tries, but I finally got it. There was over two hundred thousand in cash in that fucking safe. Careful not to move anything out of place, I

locked it back up and entered the code into my phone, so I wouldn't mess it up because when the open window came, it would be short, and there would be no room to fumble with the code. Now, we just needed Mom's travel documents.

An hour later, both of us were sitting in a building that looked like a bank in downtown D.C. The sun shone bright, but I couldn't shake off the gloom and coldness that crept through my veins and straight to my heart. I mourned when William died, but this felt so much worse. I was directly responsible for my own heartache, and Nico's. Because my father was a major jackass monster.

Last night, after Nico fucked me in his office, he carried me to our bedroom. Unlike all our other times, the way he kissed me all night and worshiped my body was different. He let me strip him naked when we got to our room.

"It's my turn," I whispered as I gently nudged him onto the bed. My fingers traced his ink on his shoulder and I leaned to press my mouth on his hot skin. I inhaled deeply his scent that became part of me.

I straddled his hips, his hard erection pressed against my butt. I licked his pulse and a soft groan sounded in our bedroom. How was it possible to want someone so much?

His hands gripped my hips, his fingers digging into my soft flesh. He was trying hard not to take over, the control was part of his DNA.

"Relax," I murmured against his lips.

"Woman," he gritted. "Keep grinding your ass against my cock, and I'll spill before I even get inside your hot, tight pussy."

My body stilled. I didn't even realize I was grinding against him. "Nico?"

"Hmmm."

"I love it when you talk dirty."

My core throbbed with the need only he could sate. My sex was drenched for him. He fucked me barely thirty

minutes ago and here I was again, ready for another round.

“I know,” he hissed, then took my hips, lifted them, and impaled me in one swift move. Both of us grunted a cry of relief. “My dirty little wife,” he crooned. “I’ll fuck you hard like this until my last dying breath.” A sharp gasp slipped through my lips. “Soft is not for us.” He might be right about that. “I’ll see your belly big with our babies.”

My core clenched around his hard cock. God, I wouldn’t mind having babies with him. Little boys that looked like their dad. He took my nipple into his mouth and my head fell back with a moan slipping through my lips.

“I’m on the pill,” I reminded him on a whimper, grinding my hips back and forth.

“Get rid of it,” he said, then followed with the gentle bite around my sensitive flesh. I circled my hips, tilting forward so my clit was pressed against his pelvis. “Tell me you’ll get rid of it,” he groaned. His fingers dug into my flesh, controlling the rhythm, directing my body.

I ground against him, lifting my hips up, then slamming back down onto his cock. He was so deep inside me, I swore I could feel him touching my womb. I relished in the sensation of being so completely filled by him.

“Ah, fuck,” I moaned.

A palm slapped hard on my ass cheek and my eyes flew open in surprise. My sex convulsed around his shaft, throbbing in the most delicious way.

“Stop smacking my ass,” I breathed, grinding my hips.

“You like it.”

He halted my hips and a frustrated breath left me. “Fuck! Nico, I was almost there.”

“Stop the pill,” he muttered. I swallowed hard. I couldn’t. Right? I couldn’t. I had to take care of mom and he betrayed me. “Do it for me, Cara Mia.”

It was the first thing he had asked me to do for him. He knew I was Benito’s daughter and wanted to have kids with me. Or maybe he just wanted an heir?

I leaned forward and took his mouth. "I'll think about it." The lie was bitter. "Now, fuck me," I begged desperately. And God did he. I screamed his name as he took me higher and higher, then threw me into the abyss of pleasure. I thought I'd drown.

Yes, last night started slower, sweeter… but it ended rough and with a lie uttered from my lips. It made me want to cry. Talk about irony in life. I wanted children and so did he.

A hundred different scenarios floated through my head, trying to tell myself this connection with him was just great sex. Mind blowing, amazing sex. Nothing more.

I shifted on the seat again, agitated we had to wait this long just to be handed Mom's documents. Mom sat stoic, not saying a word, her eyes dead with a faraway look. I wanted to know what she was thinking or feeling. Every time I asked her, no words came through her lips, and I struggled to understand her.

Bear stood by the door and a sudden feeling of suffocation slowly rose inside me. I tugged on my crewneck pink top, a sudden flush of heat inside me making me want to vomit. *Stop working yourself up*, I told myself gazing out the window. *Just stop*.

Another man walked in at that time, but I kept my eyes trained on the window, focusing on the outside, imagining I was breathing the fresh air. I had to push this feeling of agony somewhere deep down. It wasn't time to think about it now. I'd have the rest of my lonely life to think about it.

You'd think I'd learn by now that hope was for the fools.

It took a moment to register my mother's whimpers, but by then it was too late. Bear's body slumped, falling onto the floor with a loud thump and the blow to the back of my skull tilted my view sideways as I slid onto the floor. I never even felt the ground.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

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NICO

Everything was ready for tonight. We were in my D.C. office. We just concluded the meeting with the Italian families and it ensured we had concurrence not to sell the Amalfi coastal property to Benito King. However, nobody wanted to go directly against him. So, I found them a loophole. The agreement between the Italian Ambassador, Benito, and the Italian heads designated to sell the slither of property to the King family.

Benito ensured his son, Marco King, would be lined up to take it over in case of his own untimely death. Because that little weasel was an incompetent fool and didn't know how to get anything down without holding his daddy's hand.

But the agreement didn't specify which King member. After all, Cassio and Luca were King family members too. Therefore, Cassio and Luca King found themselves owners of a tiny waterfront property on the famous Amalfi coast for an outrageous price tag. It was fucking worth it.

Glancing at the phone, I saw a signal indicating the safe in my office was opened. A while ago too. How did I miss it?

"What's wrong?" Cassio asked.

"Hopefully just a glitch," I muttered, dialing up the house.

Leonardo answered on the first ring. “Who was in my office?”

They had security cameras all throughout the house. That one shouldn’t be hard to answer.

“Just your wife,” he answered.

“Where is she?”

“She went into town.”

A bad feeling hit me right in the chest. I told her to stay on the estate. “Town?”

“Yes, D.C. She took Bear with her.” A silence followed and Leonardo must have sensed the unease. “You asked her to pick up some documents for her mom?” One heartbeat. “Fuck!”

It took him saying it out loud for him to figure out I didn’t.

My bloodstream heated and tension settled under my skin and buried in my muscles with a grating texture. *She fucking left me!* Something tightened in my throat and pierced straight through my fucking chest. It felt like a goddamn heart attack.

No, she wouldn’t have taken Bear if she was leaving. But she was definitely up to something.

I rolled my shoulders, forcing calmness to wash over through every cell of me. Losing my shit right now wouldn’t help anyone.

“The twins?”

My cell signaled an incoming call. It was Alexei. Before I answered it, I waited for Leonardo’s reply.

“They are home with Gia.”

Overwhelming relief washed over me. She’d never leave without her girls. Bianca was a good mother that would give her life for her kids. Maybe not for me but for her daughters, she’d burn down this world to keep them safe.

“Tell the men to keep their eyes on them. Do not let them out of your goddamn sight.”

I ended the call.

“What in the fuck is going on?” Cassio asked. We have been friends for a long time for him not to pick up on my signals.

“Bianca left the compound,” I told him as I answered Alexei’s call. “I hope you have eyes on them,” I said grimly into my cell. Thank God and all the saints I’d asked Alexei to keep extra men around the compound. They were to follow any suspicious drive-by. It didn’t hurt to have extra security, and Alexei had sharp intuition. He even offered to stick around for a while, although this was way beneath his skillset. He took Sophia’s suffering personally.

“I do and they are in deep shit,” Alexei’s cold voice crept through the line. His words hit me like a punch to my chest.

“Speak.”

It took Alexei Nikolaev to summarize it all in two minutes. Two fucking minutes was all it took for Benito to get his filthy clutches on my woman.

Benito has my wife! He has my woman!

The same sense of dread when I found out that he got his clutches on my sister pooled in the pit of my stomach. It tasted like acid and ash. If I lost her, I’d lose my shit. There was no doubt about it.

Last night I asked her to stop the pill. Another lie. She has been taking make-shift vitamins that I planted instead of pills. I should have told her I loved her and wanted to keep her with me forever. I should have apologized for using her, manipulating her, and deceiving her.

“Nico, what is it?” Cassio asked. I forgot Luca and Cassio were still here. If something happened to their sister, they’d never forgive me. Fuck, even if they did, it wouldn’t matter because I wouldn’t.

“Benito has Bianca and her mother.” I couldn’t understand how my voice even functioned. I stood up and went to my safe.

“How?” Luca questioned.

“What happened?” Cassio demanded.

I opened the safe and took another gun out of it, a knife, and several magazines of ammunition.

“She went into the city with her mother. Benito got to her in the waiting room of the building.” I tucked a gun into the back of my pants, a knife in the holster around my ankle. I still had my gun holster. “Alexei trailed them. He knows their location.”

Cassio and Luca strode over. “I need bullets too.”

“Me too.” Luca extended his hand. “Is Alexei with us?”

I had to give it to Cassio and Luca. At least they weren’t throwing blame. Yet, I felt it. It was eating at me, and if something happened to Bianca, there’d be nothing left of my heart.

“Yes.” The numbers would still be against us. I typed a message to Leonardo to double security at the manor and send twenty men to the location Alexei shared through iCloud.

“Do you have a plan?” Cassio asked, his jaw ticking. He was pissed off, not that I couldn’t blame him. Images of Nicoletta’s body played in my mind, bloodied and raped. She died in my home, in my arms, but they butchered her body in that gallery. I still owned it, unable to get rid of the bloodied ghost. It was the last place I saw her happy.

God, please don’t let them touch Bianca. I’d burn this city to ashes.

“I go in,” I told them. “Alone. I have to see how many men we are against. There are twenty of my men enroute, but it will take them at least an hour to get there. We can’t wait that long.”

I dialed up a direct line to Vladimir Solonik, the Russian Bratva scum that purchased her agreement. I had to have all my basis covered.

“Vladimir,” he answered in a heavy Russian accent.

“Nico Morrelli here,” I told him. “I won’t be wasting your time nor mine. You bought Bianca through Benito.

She’s my wife. You can’t have her, but I’ll pay you for the contract.”

He chuckled. “Why?”

“Because I’m being nice,” I growled. “If you’d rather lose that money and your life, I’m fine with it too. She nor our children will ever be yours.”

Silence lingered as I waited for his response, while at the same time I arranged on my laptop for a courier and a sniper. It would seem I couldn’t get away from Sasha Nikolaev. Either way, that agreement would be in my possession.

“Fine,” he finally conceded. “Twenty million.”

“Courier is on his way,” I told him. Bianca and her girls were worth billions more. If he asked for my entire bank account, I would have signed it off. I’d make more. Nothing was worth more to me than my family. “Money is being transferred to your account now.”

“Fuck, should have said forty.”

I heard the bell ring. “But you didn’t. Hand the agreement for Bianca and her daughters to my courier.”

He spat a few curses. “I want a piece of Benito’s ass. I’m guessing you want him dead. So do I!”

Well, this was unexpected. Vladimir had good soldiers; I could use them today.

“You might get your chance today,” I told him. He was on board. Maybe we wouldn’t be going in underhanded. Vladimir was closer to D.C. than my men.

Now that was done. I met Bianca’s brothers’ looks. “You love her,” Cassio stated.

“Yes.” There was no reason to deny it. I should have told her. “We crossed paths when she was nineteen. I didn’t approach her; I didn’t know who she was. She’s my destiny. You have yours, Cassio; she is mine.”

Understanding passed between us.

“Yeah, the way she talked about your ass in jeans,” Luca cracked a joke. “I think she believes you are her destiny

too. Thank God she didn't comment on your cock."

I shook my head at her brother. Wise ass! If Bianca liked my ass and my cock, I'd use it until she falls in love with me. I meant it when I told her I wasn't going at it alone.

I handed Cassio and Luca an earpiece. "I have to get to Benito. He'll be with Bianca. I'd bet everything he won't leave her side and risk losing her."

Cassio nodded. "You two stay outside, wait for my men with Alexei. Then attack. Whatever happens, you go for her and get her out."

Fuck! I couldn't even contemplate that she might not be alright. I'd lose my cool and go on a murder rampage.

"If neither one of us-" *Don't go there.* "Make sure the twins are safe. No matter what."

A jerky nod.

"Let's go get her," I told them.

If I took my last breath today, it would be with her warm eyes on me.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

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BIANCA

I woke up surrounded by the scent of musty dampness, metallic blood, and rot. It made me want to retch and choke, if only my throat didn't feel like there were cold steel fingers wrapped around it, keeping it all down.

The back of my head hurt badly. Like a really bad hangover accompanied by a physical beating. Not that I had ever been beaten. When I opened my eyes, the room was pitch black. My face felt wet and sticky. I felt around with my fingertips, reaching my forehead. Finding a spot on my head, right on the side of my temple, my fingers brushed against it, and I winced at the pain.

There was a strange prickling sensation on the back of my neck. It sent unease throughout my body. My stomach muscles clenched, my breathing quickened, and my heart started to thud painfully in my chest.

I'm not alone.

I shifted, the mattress underneath my bodyweight squealing in protest.

"Ah, my daughter finally wakes," a familiar voice reached my ear. "Family reunion."

I wrenched myself into a seated position, my eyes darting in the direction of the voice.

Benito King!

My bones turned cold, and shivers shook my body. Whether it was from fear or shock, I wasn't sure. The only thing I knew was that I shouldn't be in this room with him, alone with him.

"W-what do you want?" To my horror, I stuttered. I wanted to shout and hurt him, not fucking stutter.

There was a click then a blinding white light. The sudden brightness hurt my retinas, shooting piercing pain through my temples.

"Fuck-" I muttered, groaning.

Instinctively, my eyelids shut, and I stifled a pained whimper. I furiously blinked, trying desperately to see where I was, and how bleak of a situation this was. I turned my head in the direction I thought I heard the voice come from earlier. Benito sat in a chair and barely three feet from him…

It can't be. No, no, no, God, please no!

My heart pierced and a physical pain slashed through me, though there was no blood.

"Mom," I screamed so loud and for so long, I felt a burning in my lungs. I jumped off the bed and rushed to her dangling body, trying to lift her up, save her. I had to do something.

"Give me your chair," I screeched at Benito. I tried hard to push him over. "Give me your fucking chair," I screamed, tears streaming down my face.

"She's dead," he replied calmly.

"No, we could do CPR," I wrapped my arms around her legs. "Just help me. It's not too late."

The bastard didn't move.

My mom's body hung off the ceiling fan, her neck angled weirdly and her eyes dead. The bleak, ghostly stare that would stay with me forever. Her eyes were truly dead. Tears streamed down my face, but I didn't feel them. I only tasted the saltiness and bitterness.

I lost her. Silence etched with the realization that I had lost my mother. I had her only for a week, and now she was gone. Forever! Time suspended in my brain and my chest felt hollow.

I didn't save her. I only took her into her death faster.

I struggled to draw air into my lungs, my chest squeezing, making it hard to breathe.

"You hurt my mother," I rasped, looking at her limp body, still hanging in the air.

He laughed. "No, she hung herself."

I knew better. He might not have wrapped the noose around her neck, but it was his fault. All the years she spent under his thumb, enduring his cruelty. She couldn't bear to go back. She found death to be a better option. *I didn't save her!*

Goddamn it; it hurt so bad. It was my turn to save her and take care of her, but I failed her. My eyes went to the man that started the chain of twisted events in our family. The man that destroyed my mother's life. The man that was my father.

Benito sat in a chair, smoking a cigarette, like he was just lounging around. A gun sat on his lap and there was nothing more I wanted than to take it and put a bullet in his mouth. The bloodthirsty, violent thought shook me to my core but not in a bad way. Maybe there was one thing I inherited from this bastard that would be welcomed. The murderous rage I felt right now!

I wanted to make him pay for what he did to my mother. Make him suffer. The sheer desperate need to see him suffer made me shudder with self-revolt. Yet, it felt right. If only I could somehow hurt him. The way he hurt so many others.

"You know, I always wanted a daughter," he drawled.

"It is a mercy that God didn't give you one," I spat. The hate burned like acid in the pit of my stomach.

"You are my daughter!" he roared.

I flinched at his outburst, but I refused to whimper down. “No, I’m not.”

“Your mother kept you from me,” he yelled, his silver hair all disheveled.

“No, my mother saved me from you,” I told him, full of bravado I didn’t feel. Fake it until you make it, wasn’t that the motto? And I swore on my mother and my girls that I would kill this bastard in front of me. I didn’t care if it was the last thing I ever did on this earth, I would kill him. “You are going to die,” I vowed.

He laughed. “You got balls, girl.”

I rolled my eyes. No comment needed there.

“You inherited something I want,” he switched the subject suddenly.

“And what’s that?” I asked, acting like I didn’t give a shit while inside I prayed it wasn’t my girls. Anything but my girls. I guess that was what my mother was praying for too when she found out she was pregnant.

“The Amalfi property.”

It was not the answer I expected. I narrowed my eyes on him, trying to figure this man out. I really didn’t like him. The menace seeped out of him in gallons. And to think he gave me life. Ugh!

He must have had at least one single, decent sperm, and thankfully that one gave me life.

“Why?” Not that I would give it to him.

“Because it belongs to me,” he purred.

Delusional. That was the best adjective to describe this man.

“I’ll never give you that property,” I rasped out, titling my chin in defiance. “It belonged to my mother’s family, and you will never get it. Even if it kills me. If you-”

“Don’t toy with me, Bianca,” he interrupted harshly. “You’ll find out I can be persuasive.”

I scoffed. “Keep telling yourself that.”

He threw his head and laughed. Actual full blown laughter. Maniac! He belonged in a psych ward.

“You are the best one out of all my worthless children.”

“Gee, thanks,” I muttered. “Exactly the title I didn’t want.”

He lifted his phone and dialed. “Bring him in.”

I slowly shifted away from him, my bare feet cool against the tiled floor. Jesus, what happened to my shoes. If that door opened, I’d run. Even if I had to use the football skills John and William taught me. It was time for a touchdown.

Dear Lord, let me get this. Right now.

I sucked at sports, but I could run very fast. I just needed to shove through Benito and whoever was coming.

The door opened and Nico was marched into the room, his hands bound and five men trained on him. *Fuck!*

“Hey, Cara Mia,” he greeted me, seemingly relaxed. But he was pissed; his jaw ticked in that familiar way.

Our eyes met and I read nothing in his stormy gray eyes. His dark hair was slightly ruffled, but he strode in with confidence. Like he wasn’t the prisoner here.

His eyes traveled to my mom’s body, and for the briefest fraction of a second, sorrow flashed in them, but he quickly masked it.

“Ah, my son-in-law.” Benito’s smile was wintery and cruel, sending fear straight to my bones. “We’ll have to end our relationship. I never gave my daughter permission to get married.”

“Funny,” Nico addressed my father, cocking his eyebrow. “Because I don’t give a fuck about your permission. She’s still my wife.”

“We can fix that quickly,” Benito said, giving a nod to one of the men. The guard pulled out his gun and pointed it straight at his head. “I made her a widow once already.”

“No!” The word escaped before I thought better of it. I took two steps, standing barely a foot from my father and

three from Nico.

Benito's eyes gleamed smugly. He found my weakness. "Ah, Daughter. Didn't your mother tell you not to think with your heart?"

I blinked my eyes, trying to stay strong and then his earlier words sunk in. "What do you mean?" I asked Benito. "You made me a widow once already?"

Focusing on his dark eyes, I wished all his secrets were out. Though I had a feeling I wouldn't like them. He was a despicable man.

Benito chuckled. "We had to get rid of William, my dear," he deadpanned. "Eventually your mother was going to die and the property was going to pass on to you. So I had to marry you off to someone that was willing to share. Truthfully, I was going to have you replace your mother… but that was before I learned you are my daughter."

My stomach rolled. This man was sick. Revolting! There was no other word for it. A sick, weaselly evil bastard.

"H-how?" I fucking hated when I was scared. It made me stutter. "How did you kill William?"

"False diagnosis," he smiled, clearly satisfied with himself. "Then I had him pumped full of poison until the bastard died."

I watched his dark eyes, so full of malevolence and cruelty. He was even worse than I imagined, and my picture of Benito King was rather bad.

"You are insane," I whispered in horror. Fear exploded in my chest for Nico. The man I love. My husband was strong, but I didn't have a clue how many people we were against here. I couldn't let this lunatic destroy another person I love. Then my daughters would be next.

I had to buy us time. Somehow.

"Property?" I asked him. He mentioned he wanted property. I imagined he wanted the Amalfi coast property. I scrunched my eyebrows, studying Benito. I had to get him talking. "Why?"

“The Amalfi coast property,” he answered annoyed. Like I should know by some fucking miracle what he wanted. “That fucking bitch of your mother fooled me. She transferred it to you shortly after your grandmother died.”

“Don’t talk about my mother like that,” I hissed. He was a vile, despicable human being and he had no right to talk about anyone like that. Least of all my mother!

This earned me a tight smile, but Benito’s eyes remained unmoving. He felt nothing for anyone. He only cared about himself and his own agendas. Nothing and nobody else. He destroyed people without any care or loss of sleep.

“Give me the property, and I’ll make your husband’s death a quick one.” I stared back at my father, wide-eyed and with my heart pounding right out of my chest. My eyes traveled to my husband. My beautiful liar. He got his revenge but at what expense.

Still… I didn’t want to see him hurt. I understood his need for settling the score. After all, I wanted to make Benito pay for the hurt he caused my own mother. The bitterness and anger swelled inside me and ate at my soul, demanding I make him pay. I imagined my husband felt something along the same line.

“Gentlemen, please show my daughter I don’t make empty threats.”

One of Benito’s men moved towards Nico with a cruel look on his face. His hand blurred through the air, before he punched Nico hard in his stomach, while another brought his elbow down hard between his shoulder blades.

“Nico!” I screamed, taking a step towards him, but Benito wrapped his hand around my arm, holding me back.

“You can’t save him,” Benito taunted. “He is not a man I’d ever let touch my daughter.”

“Let me go,” I hissed, shoving against Benito. “You fucking bastard. You can’t have him!” He had me in a tight hold, but I refused to give up. I swung my head backwards and headbutted Benito.

“Fuck!” he snapped his grip tightening on me, painfully. My head throbbed from the impact, my eyes staring at my husband. Benito killed William and now he wanted to end Nico’s life.

“You want to end it?” Benito asked.

I nodded, my eyes never leaving my husband’s face.

“Sign over that property,” he repeated.

“Will you let Nico go?” I rasped. “Safe and sound. You let him go.”

“Don’t do it, Cara Mia,” Nico wheezed. “Trust me.”

Our eyes met, a thousand words unspoken lingered in the air. I should have told him that I loved him. I wanted to have his babies, live by his side until my last breath. Now, I might not have a chance to. I should have trusted him with my paternal secret and begged him to help me. We could have avenged his sister and my mother together.

“I trust you,” I breathed out.

“That’s my love,” he murmured. “We’ll go on a honeymoon after this.”

A strangled, choked whimper escaped me. I wasn’t sure that we were getting out of here.

“Bianca,” Benito’s voice was a warning.

My mother’s body was a reminder of what he was capable of. But even if I gave him what he wanted, I knew he would not let us go. Benito’s words and promises meant nothing. He’d kill Nico and sell me off to someone. Because that was this man’s legacy.

Nico’s optimism seemed to ignite Benito’s anger. Or maybe it was my denial to sign over the property he so desperately needed.

Benito’s men started kicking the crap out of Nico, while they held his hands so he couldn’t fight back.

“Stop hurting him,” I begged Benito, looking helpless at them kicking my husband over and over again.

“I’m fine,” Nico grunted. “I’m fine.”

“Silence him.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. It was time I fought Benito tooth and nail, no matter what. My eyes scanned over Benito and his chair, then noted his gun. Acting on instinct, I reached out and grabbed the gun sitting on Benito’s chair.

“Don’t you fucking dare touch him,” I hissed, pointing the gun at Benito. “Or I’ll blow out his fucking brains.”

He lifted his hand, in a silent command to his men to stop. Of course, when his life was in danger, everyone stopped. Benito was a coward; he valued nobody but himself.

“Bianca, give me the gun,” Benito urged.

Yeah, that would never happen. I wanted to fill this man with lead. For destroying Mom’s life. For killing William. For hurting Nico’s sister. And most of all, for hurting my husband.

“I don’t think so,” I told him. “Not so brave when your life is hanging by a thread. Are you, Father?” I snarled. “Father?” I scoffed. “You wouldn’t know the meaning of that word.”

“You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me,” he hissed.

“Tell your men to untie my husband,” I told him. “Or I’ll put a bullet into your skull.” I narrowed my eyes on him. “Or maybe I’ll start lower. Close to your fucking dick. So, you can’t hurt women anymore.”

“Bianca-” His voice warned.

I fired the shot, hitting Benito straight into his thigh, ten inches from his groin.

“You fucking bitch,” he snarled.

“Ooops, I missed.” I smiled coolly. Maybe I lost my mind. “Do you know what my *dad’s* favorite pastime was?” I asked, my eyes locked on this man that supposedly gave me life as I hunched over, jabbing the barrel of the gun to his wound. Benito was a sperm donor, nothing else. He kept my mother from me for years; I wouldn’t let him take my husband away too. He’d come after our children and other women. He deserved to die. “Taking me to the gun range. I

am a ***very*** good shot. In fact, I think the last time I missed I was ten." Then I rolled my eyes. "And now. I guess I'm out of practice."

Something flashed in Benito's eyes, it almost looked like fucking pride.

"He's not your father."

"But he is," I said in a calm voice, taking a page out of my husband's book. My heart thundered like a damn fish out of water, but it didn't matter. As long as I portrayed calmness.

I wouldn't allow this cruel man to rile me up. He was the filth on this earth and didn't deserve to live. "It takes a lot more to be a dad than to just produce life. But you wouldn't know that, would you Benito?"

His dark eyes, so much like my own, stared at me, our battle of wills refusing either one of us to cave.

He chuckled, but there was bitterness in his voice.

"Sofia should have never kept you from me," he rasped. "You are mine."

I scoffed. "No, I'm not. And thank God that she left me with Grandma and Dad." I tilted my chin towards Nico. I raised to my full length. "You two, untie my husband. The next bullet, it will be the end of Benito."

"If you shoot me, you'll bring all of the mafia to your doorstep," he threatened. "And you won't be able to shoot them all."

"That's okay," I told him with a false bravado. "I'll have my husband, and my brothers, along with his men. You might find you don't have as many people at your back as you thought, Benito."

Jesus, I actually acted like I knew what I was talking about. It was all smoke.

"You don't know everything, Daughter." I knew he called me that to irk me. I hated the idea of being his daughter. He was a true monster, twisted and sick, getting off on the pain of others. "I have a few cards up my sleeve."

I didn’t care what he had to say. He might have some aces up his sleeve, but Nico and his friends could work against him. I just wanted my husband back. I needed to tell him I loved him, needed his body next to me when I fall asleep and when I wake up. Fuck if I would live the rest of my life alone. We’d work out our shit Together. We’d raise the girls together, keep them safe.

“How about a trade?” Benito suggested with a gleam I didn’t like in his eyes. “You for Nico.”

“No,” Nico grunted. “Don’t do it, Bianca.”

“How about a better suggestion?” I told him. “Give me my husband and I let you live. See, you don’t get to call the shots. I’m the one with the gun.”

Benito threw his head and laughed. “If you only grew up alongside me,” he drawled, making my stomach churn. “You would have made me proud.”

“Fuck. You.” I spat at him. “The last thing I want to do is make you proud.” I knew hate burned in my eyes. He wanted to control me, to destroy the real me and everything I love. Benito King was all kinds of twisted. It was a mystery that Cassio and Luca turned out somewhat normal.

“Give. Me. My. Husband. Back.” I told him. “Last warning.”

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

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NICO

Bianca made me so proud. When we get home, I'd punish her for leaving the estate without telling me, and then I planned on fucking her raw. Until she screamed my name so loud, the entire state heard it.

"Hey, Father-in-law," I called out. He was pale, his pants soaked in blood. My woman was a great shot. I'd have to keep that in mind. "I have a surprise for you."

I reached into my pocket, ignoring the piercing pain running through my shoulder. Pulling out a folded piece of paper, weighed down with a chip.

"Here, Benito," I tossed it across the room. "Vladimir sold me the Belle agreement for the last generation of the Catalano family. Oh, and he says hi. He's on his way. Couldn't stop him."

What little color was left in his face drained from Benito's face, and I couldn't help but smile coldly. "You've fucked up, Benito, thinking I'd ever let you take my wife or our children from me," I said darkly. "Vladimir will give you the same treatment you have given my wife, my sister, and Bianca's mother."

Bianca looked in confusion back and forth between me and Benito. Alexei, Cassio, and Luca were right behind me.

I counted on Benito thinking he was smarter and walked right into their trap.

Panic evident on Benito's face, he scrambled for the door, limping like the weasel he was. I reached out to grab him by his neck when the explosion blasted. Smoke engulfed and one side of the building disintegrated. Ignoring the pain, I threw myself across the room and covered Bianca's body. Both of us tumbled down onto the ground.

"Stay down," I whispered into her ear. "I got you."

Covering most of her small, soft body underneath me, I kept mumbling nonsense in her ear.

The sounds of gunfire surrounded us. Bullets whizzed through the air. I kept my hands on her head, my mouth next to hers.

"You're good," I murmured. "You're safe." Another explosion shook the ground, and her breath brushed on my mouth on a whimper. "I got you, love."

I crawled us a few feet over, tucking her under the bed, to keep her out of sight. She still clutched the gun in her hand.

"Don't leave me here." Her voice shook, her free hand gripped on my shirt.

"Never," I vowed, pressing my lips on hers. "We are going home tonight. Together."

I tried to take her gun, but she clung to it so I let her be. She seemed to know how to handle it. And if she shot me… well, so be it. It wasn't as if I didn't deserve it. All that mattered to me was that she was safe.

"Nico," her voice was so quiet, drowned out by the gunfight. I itched to go and fight, kill all those bastards that even contemplated hurting my wife, but Bianca's safety was more important.

"Yes, Cara Mia?"

"If we don't make it," she muttered.

"We will," I assured her. "I brought in reinforcements."

She pressed herself tighter against me. “I love you, Nico.” The bullets stopped, gunfire ceased, and the dust cleared. It ended as quickly as it started. But still my ears buzzed from her words. I lifted off her slightly, searching her face. “I do. It doesn’t make any sense and knowing that Benito is my biological father-”

I smashed my mouth against hers to stop any more words. Her lips molded into mine, and I swallowed her moan.

Shit, I would have to tell her everything. About the pill, my scheming. But she loved me. I knew we’d overcome it all. She’d make me grovel, but I’d gladly do it. For her. Only for her.

“There you are, lovebirds,” Luca drawled. I pressed another kiss to her lips, and she returned it. Luca just wouldn’t let go, though. “I have to tell you both; this is neither the time nor the place to get frisky.”

I flipped him a middle finger over my head. Bianca did the same.

“Awwww, sister, you hurt my feelings!” Luca purred.

Bianca peeked over my shoulder. “You knew?”

“Of course,” Cassio stepped in. “Nico, stop humping my sister.”

Exhausted, I rolled over and flipped him two middle fingers. Standing up, I pulled Bianca safely into my arms.

“Don’t ever scare me like this again,” I muttered against her forehead, pressing a kiss there.

She pushed away from me, and I gave her the distance she needed. For now. Her eyes frantically searched around.

“My mom,” she glanced up, to where her mother’s body hung earlier. Her face was a mess of tears and dust, her dark hair tangled.

Her eyes frantically searched for her mother’s body, and the moment she spotted it, she rushed to it on her wobbly legs.

“Cara Mia, you shouldn’t-”

“Bianca, it’s not a pretty sight,” Cassio warned her.

“I don’t care.” She fell onto her knees. The look on her face was gut wrenching and tears streamed down her face. Wrapping her arms around her mom, she brought the body against her chest. Her grief hit me right into my chest.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured, her body rocking back and forth with her mother’s limp body in her arms. Bianca’s pain felt like my own, the painful memories of my own flooding back. Three years ago, it was me that held my sister that way. “It’s all my fault, Mom.”

“Bianca, love.” I lowered myself to my knees, next to her. “It’s not your fault. Your mom knew that.”

She shook her head, the side of her face a bloody mess from the blood and dirt. I had to make sure she had no injuries, that she was alright.

“It’s all my fault,” she murmured crying, her body in constant back and forth motion, like she tried to rock her mother to sleep.

“No, it’s not,” I rasped. “It’s Benito’s.”

She stilled at his name, glanced up, her eyes shimmering like wet diamonds. “Is he dead?”

I flicked my eyes to Cassio, to see him look towards the door. I followed his gaze to see Vladimir emerging through the door, holding Benito by his throat and Alexei on the other side of Benito. Just in case he got away.

“You!” Her voice was rough, her eyes full of fury. She gently laid her mother’s body down, as if she was sleeping, then stood up. “You monster!” She launched herself at Benito, her fist connecting with his chest. “You did this to her!”

I came right behind her to ensure no harm came to her. If she wanted to beat Benito black and blue, I wouldn’t stop her. Hell, I’d assist her. The bastard deserved a long and painful death.

Benito scoffed. “No, she did it,” he drawled. “She should have never kept my daughter from me.”

“I’m not your daughter!” she screamed hysterically. “You are a monster.”

“Then so are you,” he taunted her. “Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. You look nothing like your mother or her wretched family.”

The silence that followed that statement was deafening, and I knew Bianca, just like Cassio and Luca, hated the resemblance to Benito. Except that none of them were him. Yes, they had his dark hair and eyes, but so did a million other people on this planet.

She glanced around the room, her eyes landing on the gun she clutched previously. There was something mundane and too numb about the way she stepped away from Benito.

“Bianca, love-”

She didn’t stop. We all watched her walk to the gun, pick it up and come back, holding it tightly.

“Any last words, Father?”

“Bianca,” I took her face and forced her to look at me. Sorrow, anguish and pain reflected in those beautiful eyes. I was used to seeing desire, softness there… not this. “If you pull that trigger, it stays with you forever.”

“Bianca, let me do it,” Cassio stepped in.

“No,” she protested, clutching the gun. “Let me go, Nico.” Fuck, I didn’t want her to do something she might regret. That would eat at her for the rest of her life. “I won’t regret it for the rest of my life,” she whispered, her eyes locked on her father’s face. “You know why?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Because he killed my mother. He’s been killing her for twenty-six years. A bullet in his skull is better than he deserves, but I’ll settle for it.”

She aimed the gun against his skull, her hand sure and steady. “Any last words, Benito?”

“I’m your father,” he hissed, his eyes on his daughter with some sick devotion.

She tilted her head as if considering his words. “Maybe, but I still would have killed the man who raised me for hurting my mother. Biology won’t save you.”

Alexei and Vladimir stepped aside, getting out of the line of fire. I swore there was admiration in both their eyes as they watched my wife.

“Rot in hell, Benito.” Her final farewell and then she pulled the trigger. My wife killed Benito King. Men have been trying to kill this man for years and failed, including me. Yet, she stood over his body and watched the life extinguish in his eyes.

The silence that followed was deafening, yet the loudest sound I’ve ever heard. The other men felt it too. Everyone remained still, watching the youngest member of the King family as a goddess of revenge standing over her father’s body.

“Bianca, love. Give me the gun.” I gently took her hand and peeled her fingers off the gun. “Let me take you home.”

She blinked hard, her lower lip trembling. “M-mom,” she breathed out, the hurt in her eyes breaking me. “I can’t leave her.”

I handed the gun to Cassio, without looking away from my wife. “We’ll take her home too. We never leave anyone behind.”

She nodded, her eyes darting back to her mother’s dead body. She went to it again and lifted her.

I shared a look with her brothers and the other men. If the underworld gets wind of Bianca killing Benito, some might want to retaliate. Marco King would want to retaliate.

“What happened here cannot leave this room,” I told them all. Bianca’s soft sobs shattered the room and all of us glanced her way.

“Agreed,” everyone muttered.

“We should say either Cassio killed Benito,” Vladimir chimed in. “Or you, Nico. Otherwise, conclusions will be

made. Marco King is just as sick as Benito. He'll come for her if he hears it was her."

I never thought I'd work side by side with Vladimir.

Cassio and I shared a look. It didn't matter to me. The list of people that wanted Benito dead was long and I was on it. So were his illegitimate sons.

"I killed him," Luca commented. "Cassio cannot be the one. Otherwise, some families might be hesitant to follow him when he takes over. It cannot be you, Nico. Otherwise, my sister becomes the target. I shot him."

Two heartbeats. A jerky nod. Handshakes and more alliance were forged.

The cleaning crew was already on site and men walked away to give Bianca space.

I strode to her and wrapped my arms around her. I wished I could fix it, bring her mother back.

"Let's go home," I whispered against her hair. "We can stop at my penthouse, clean you up before we go home. The twins need you."

Her glimmering eyes raised to mine.

"You used me to get revenge." Maybe it was my fear, but the accusation in her voice felt like a conviction.

"I did," I confessed. "I was a blind idiot. A jackass."

She nodded. "It wasn't like you could trust me," she whispered.

"I do trust you, Bianca. But even more, I want to protect you. Keep you safe, because losing you would cost me my sanity."

Her dark eyes glistened; our gazes locked.

"Ever since I saw you in the club, I wanted you. When I found out you were Benito's daughter… fuck, I saw it as an opening to take you for mine. But you were married. No matter what, I couldn't curb this need for you. I schemed to use you through your husband's weakness, but then I heard your conversation with William. He was dying. I decided I'd make you mine, after you had time to grieve."

Her dark eyes shone with tears. “I didn’t save her,” she murmured, pressing her forehead against her mom’s.

“She saved you,” I wrapped my arms around her. “Like you would do anything to save your girls. And I would do anything to save all three of you. Because she loved you. And I love you.”

Her tear stained eyes met mine.

“You really do?”

“I love you, Bianca Morrelli. Always and forever.” A soft gasp and her eyes shone like diamonds. “You are my breath, my life, my everything. You and the girls,” I rasped, hoping she’d trust me in this. “I fucking want you forever. Until my last breath, you are it for me. I want to raise our family together, love you the way you deserve to be loved. And fucking kill anyone that even dares to look at our family the wrong way.”

Her eyes lowered to her mother. “She didn’t want me to be married to the mafia.”

“I can’t blame her,” I told her. “And if that is what you want, I’ll set you up. But let me do it the right way. So you and the girls are safe.”

“You’d let me go?”

Something in my chest cracked at the idea of letting her go. I didn’t know if I’d survive it, but if it made her happy, I would let her go. More than anything else in the world, I wanted to see her happy.

“Fuck, Bianca, I don’t want to let you go,” I said. “But if that will make you happy, I will. Just let me do it the right way.” I helped her lower her mother’s body. “Let her rest in peace. She would want you to be happy and safe.”

I pulled her up onto her feet and nodded to Bear. He was banged up but refused to be sent home. He wanted to see this through. He lifted the body as if he was lifting a child and walked out with her.

“We’ll wait outside,” Cassio and Luca murmured at the door, leaving us all alone amidst the chaos.

“You mean it?”

“I do, but which part specifically?”

“You love me?”

“Fuck yes, I love you.” My lips crashed against hers. “But I want your happiness more.”

Her body pressed against mine, her small hands wrapping around my torso.

“I love you too. So damn much.” She buried her head into my chest, right where my heart beat that belonged to her. “Everything happened so fast. I just want us to get to know each other.” I tensed at that. “No, not like a do-over, Nico. But to learn each other more than just in the bedroom. Because I want this connection with you for life.”

My restraint vanished and my mouth latched on to her lips. “I’m with you for life. Forever.”

All I needed was her.

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EPILOGUE

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Nico - One Year Later

The christening of Luciano’s newborn went off without a glitch. My wife’s eyes shone with emotions, her body leaning against mine. She was practically in my lap, just the way I preferred it. Our three-month-old sons were sound asleep, one in Bianca's arms and the other in my mother’s, who sat next to us.

The girls were seated with Luca and Matteo, while we stayed in the back, with the double stroller.

I didn’t think it was possible to be so fucking happy. Yet, I was. My eyes lingered on my wife and son, then to my mother holding my other son. We had twin boys. The world was so fucking right that I was scared that someone would fuck it up. Take it all away from me.

It scared me how much I had to lose. But that was a good thing, because it meant we had something valuable. Something incredible.

Bianca shifted, leaning further into me and accidentally grinding against my cock. It was all it took for my wife to get me hard. I groaned softly and her face turned my way with an innocent expression, but her eyes gave her away. They twinkled mischievously.

“What’s the matter, husband?” she asked softly as the priest gave his blessings to Luciano’s little girl.

“Are you trying to torment me?” I whispered softly against her ear.

She shifted her body again, brushing against my erection. “Not at all,” she purred. “Just getting you back for being a sneaky husband and switching my birth control pills with vitamins. Prenatal vitamins at that.”

Yep, she was pissed off when she found that out. I never saw a woman go from ecstatically happy to find out she was pregnant to murderous rage at my fucked up ways.

I gently bit into her earlobe. “But look what we got,” I murmured. “Now we have four beautiful kids.”

Her mouth sought out mine, and I took it hungrily. I’d never get enough of her.

“Do you want more kids?” she whispered against my lips.

“Fuck, yeah.” I suspected we’d have a large family, especially considering I couldn’t keep my hands off my wife. “But you have to recover first.”

“So no more switching my pills,” she taunted.

“No more,” I promised. “You tell me when you are ready.”

She nuzzled her face into the crook of my neck, our baby cooing in her arms. Some days, I felt like my chest would just explode. Fucking explode from all the love and happiness.

“I won’t go back on the pill,” she murmured low against my neck. “If it happens, *bene*. If it doesn’t, that’s fine too.” She lifted her head, our eyes connected and I nodded in acknowledgement. Her tongue traced lightly across my lips. “I could put the baby in the stroller and ask Nancy to keep an eye on the kids.” My cock hardened at her proposition. “And we could get started today.” Her voice was a soft whisper. God, I loved this woman so much. She had given me her mouth while she recovered, but I felt like a bastard taking it. Fucking my wife’s mouth was heaven

but nothing compared to her pussy. “I want to inspect your new tattoo,” she purred. “It gets me so hot.”

I gently took the baby from her arms, stood up from my seat, and put our little Dominico into the stroller. He never even stirred. He was mama's boy and slept like her too.

“Nancy,” Bianca called out in a hushed tone. “Nico wants to see-” she fumbled with an excuse. “Some flowers.” I stifled a choked laugh. I would never be looking at fucking flowers. “Can you keep an eye on the kids please?”

She blushed and it was enough to tell my mother what the deal was. My wife’s eyes darted to our girls who were still glued next to their uncles.

“Of course.” My mother wasn’t fooled, her eyes twinkled with amusement. She looked younger and happier than I ever recalled. Nicoletta was still a dark, somber shadow, and her loss would never completely heal, but we all learned to live with it and cherish our present. Our family was priceless.

“Let’s go look at the flowers.” Bianca dragged me by my hand towards the opposite side of the yard.

The moment we were out of the earshot, I chuckled. “Flowers? You better leave lying to me, Cara Mia.”

“Whatever.”

We were right by the entrance to Mr. Vitale’s, Luciano’s father, greenhouse, and I urged my wife inside it. It would be empty, and there were no cameras in there. I hungered for her, but I’d kill any man that saw bliss on her face as she orgasmed. That was all mine and only mine. The moment the door shut behind us, I reached for her ass and lifted her, her legs wrapped around my waist.

She slammed her mouth on mine. This craving for her, starvation for her never eased. It grew with each day, filling all the empty spaces in my heart. I loved her more with each passing day. She and our family were my everything. I’d burned down this world to keep them protected.

I broke our kiss and sought out her eyes. “I love you, Nico,” she murmured softly. I loved hearing those words from my wife. I’d never tire of them. “So damn much, it scares me sometimes.”

“Me too,” I admitted. “I want to tattoo your name across the heart in my chest. You are mine and I’m yours. Forever. Nothing will ever keep me away from you.”

I set my hand around her neck, right over her frantic pulse and like always, she leaned into my touch. I slammed my mouth against hers and she returned the kiss.

“Yours,” she murmured against my lips. “I need you now.”

Pinning her against the hard wall and my hips, I tore open the front of my pants and pushed her panties to one side. Our mouths collided again, hungrily as I impaled her in one rough thrust. God, it was always amazing with her. Every time was amazing and different. I’d lose my mind without her.

“I love you, Nico,” she cried out against my lips.

“Te amo.”

This love for her was stronger than anything I had ever felt. I pounded into her, unable to pace my desire. I fucked her hard, like I haven’t had her this morning or last night or the night before. Her inner muscles squeezed around my cock, and I knew she was close.

“Come for me!” I roared, my own orgasm climbing up my spine. “Come for me, Bianca.”

“Fuck,” she breathed against my lips. She tensed then her pussy convulsed around my dick as she came with a shudder and my name on her lips. My own orgasm spiraled me into oblivion where there was nothing, just the two of us.

Thirty minutes later, we were both cleaned up and back at the party. Bianca stood by Cassio and Grace, holding little Francesca. She loved kids, cooing at the little girl as she did our boys.

“Daddy, Daddy.” Hannah's voice had me tearing my gaze from my wife. My daughter ran over to me with a serious look on her face. My fucking insides melted every time the girls called me Dad. I suspected they knew it too and used it to get their way. Luciano and Cassio gave me shit about it all the time, though they were no better.

I lowered myself down to her eye level. Her blue eyes, so much like her grandmother’s, shone with excitement.

“Yes, princess?”

She took my hand and glanced at Luciano who stood next to me. “Mr. Vitale, it’s good you are here.”

He lowered down too, trying hard to hold his grin back. Hannah always came up with the darndest things to say or do. Her logic rivaled her mother’s, in the best way possible.

“How come?” he asked her, keeping his voice even while his lip twitched.

“Matteo is going to marry me,” she squealed. Then jumped up and down like she just got the proposal of the century. Luciano and I shared an amusing look.

“Wow, princess,” Luciano grinned. “That’s a big move. Are you ready?”

She nodded eagerly. “Yes, I’ll learn how to make ice cream like Mom. Just the way he likes it. And he’s going to buy me a pretty ring. Just like Daddy got Mommy.”

I chuckled. Hannah was enthralled with all things shiny. Unlike Arianna, who preferred spending time drawing and painting. “I don’t think Mom will be happy to let you marry so young,” I told her.

Hannah scoffed. “Arianna said she’ll distract her.”

Both Luciano and I threw our heads back and laughed. “Okay, Hannah,” I told her. “But first we will wait about twenty years or so.”

She frowned. “Isn’t that a long time?”

“Not that long.”

She chewed her lower lip, thinking about it for a moment. The motion reminded me of her mother. “Okay then,” she agreed. “Daddy, can you buy me the prettiest princess dress?” She fluttered her eyelashes. “I want Matteo to like my dress and buy me the prettiest ring.”

Without waiting for an answer, because she knew she’d get whatever she asked for, she took off yelling, “They said yes.”

I stood up, shaking my head. “Tell your son to keep his hands off my daughter.”

Luciano grinned. “I can’t help that my son is irresistible to the ladies.”

“Just remember you have a daughter, and I have two sons.”

“Prick,” he muttered, though smiling. “I’ll have a talk with my son.”

“And I will talk to my sons,” I announced, grinning. “When they get out of diapers.”

Bianca’s hands came around me. “What are we going to talk to our children about?”

I shuffled her in front of me and wrapped my arms around her. “About women and how to treat them, and love them forever. Like I love you.”

Her face softened. “Awww, I love you too. And I am so happy you forced me to marry you. Despite everything.” Her mouth came to mine but stopped inches from it. “If you give any ideas to our children about forced or arranged marriages, or swapped pills, Sasha’s and Luca’s offer to take you out still stands, you know.”

“You would miss me, Cara Mia.”

“I would,” she murmured. Her body pressed against mine. “Because you, Nico Morrelli, are my destiny.”

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PREVIEW OF BELLES & MOBSTERS: CASSIO

Nine years ago
Cassio

"Where the fuck is she, Cassio?"

Luca, my brother, was weary. I couldn't blame him. We regularly didn't do favors for the Irish nor Bratva. But this one seemed important to Callahan and the fact that he came to me begging for the favor spoke volumes. Let's just say that having the head of the Irish owe me a favor would be priceless. And my brother and I would need the favor returned any day. We needed alliances if we were to become stronger, and this seemed like a good place to start.

Our father, Benito King, could decide on a spur of the moment's notice, he no longer needed us. I was under no illusion that he'd eliminate us without a second thought. After all, it wouldn't be the first time.

Keep your friends close. But keep your enemies even closer. My nonno's favorite saying. It was only thanks to him that Luca and I survived. Luca was still a kid the first time my father attempted to have us killed. The greedy bastard thought Nonno would give him a free pass to his resources in Italy.

He didn’t count on Nico Morrelli killing his scout and helping me kill the rest of the men he sent after me. It was the year things started to turn for me. I forged friendships with men that became lifelong friends. Luciano and I grew up together, but Nico and Alessio made us even stronger. Raphael Santos and Alexei Nikolaev fit right in with our mission. One day, we’d burn this motherfucking flesh trading business to the ground and my father right along with it. In order to succeed though, we’d have to make alliances with Bratva, Irish, Italians, Cartel… all of them. Unknowingly, Callahan opened up an opportunity. As long as we all stood against trading women like cattle.

“Are you sure this is not a set up?” Luca hissed. I couldn’t blame him for being paranoid. Having Benito for a father would do that to you.

“Yes,” I deadpanned; though truth be told, I had nothing to base it on. Except my gut feeling. But I couldn’t say that to Luca. He’d blow a gasket.

Luca was only five years younger than me but patience was not his virtue at all. And gut feeling wasn’t something he relied on. At twenty-five, Luca was almost as tall and strong as me. We were both hired killers, usually sent to eliminate people. This mission, unlike most previous ones, was to rescue, not to kill. It made him antsy.

Time was running out on us. Our helicopter wouldn’t wait for us forever. This was supposed to be an in and out job. The elevated terrain made it hard to land on the mountain chain of Mt. Ararat. It was the reason we couldn’t ambush these bastards and had to come in loud and clear via helicopter.

This territory of Turkey, almost on the border of Armenia, was pretty much lawless. It was used as a transportation hub between Asia, Africa, and Europe for smuggling girls. I’d know; my father participated in that shit.

Luca's eyes darted around, expecting an ambush. We heard shouting outside, our guys keeping them distracted so we could sneak in. It was mid-May, but it was hot as Hades here and the heat made this place's stench tenfold.

The sounds of crying and screaming traveled down the tunnels, disgust and rage boiling in my blood. There was no mistaking those were all sounds of trapped women. All of us in the underworld were sinners, but it took a special kind of low to delve into human trafficking. That my own family participated in that kind of shit made me feel a special kind of low too.

"This place makes me sick," Luca gritted. *Ditto,* I thought silently.

Luca didn't question me when I told him I took this assignment, but I knew he thought it was stupid to work with the Irish. I didn't think so. The old man, Callahan, was too shaken up when he asked for help. I wasn't even sure what possessed me to agree to it. It wasn't as if the Callahans were our friends. There was a reluctant truce between his family and ours, and they hated all the King members, regardless if we worked with or against Benito. It was risky to do this, but the leverage it would give us was worth it.

Truthfully, it piqued my curiosity to know why a man like him would give a damn about some girl that was kidnapped. He didn't give me much. It couldn't be a member of his family. He had no children of his own. His nephews didn't have any children and his niece was too old to fit the bill. The description he provided didn't resemble Margaret Callahan at all.

I'll find out soon enough, I thought to myself.

Callahan was so desperate to save her, he promised me an unknown debt… to be paid whenever I decide. Whoever this girl was, she was valuable to him.

Women's whimpers came from the end of the tunnel, and it took all I had not to follow it so I could handle it. But

we had a mission, rescue the girl and get her back safely. Once that happened, Luca and I would be back. No questions asked. We couldn't just pretend we did our part and move on as if there weren't women left behind here.

"Is this the cell?" Luca asked, bringing my focus to this situation. I scanned the area with my eyes and glanced at the map. Yes, this was it. Our intel indicated she'd be in this cell and there was nobody here. Leaving without her, dead or alive, wasn't an option. Callahan was clear… he would pay the debt only if we brought the girl back home. Regardless what shape she was in.

A young boy, about fifteen, came around the corner and both Luca and I pointed guns at him.

"You look for the girl? Fire in her hair?" he asked in broken English. "English?"

Interesting description, I thought. Callahan gave a basic description, fourteen-year-old girl, red hair, blue eyes, and a birthmark on her upper left shoulder. Birthmark in the shape of a butterfly.

"Where is she?" Luca spat. "You better speak, before I blow your fucking brains out."

"Easy, Luca," I calmed my brother. He was just a kid, although he had a shotgun hung over his shoulder. This world was different from ours. "Can you show us where the girl is… the one with fire in her hair?"

He eyed us warily and I kept my eyes firmly on him. Danger came in all shapes and sizes. We couldn't afford to lower our guard, but we wouldn't be trigger happy either.

"Follow," he replied and turned to go down the left corridor.

"It could be a trap," Luca stated the obvious under his breath.

We had two choices. Either leave empty handed or follow the lead. Something was nudging me to follow through, find the girl. I wasn't sure what it was but it almost felt like my life depended on it. I scoffed at that. It

was more that I wanted to reap the benefits by blackmailing Callahan into an open ended debt.

I followed, sound of Luca's curses behind me as he followed along too. We walked through dark corridors. Both of us kept our eyes and all our senses on alert. It wouldn't do us any good to have Callahan forever in our debt if we were dead.

Finally, the boy stopped and pointed his head towards the door. I inched carefully and glanced through the small iron bars on top of the wooden door.

Holy fuck!

That was the first thought as I saw a young girl crouched into a ball in the corner of the room, rocking back and forth. Her knees pressed against her chest, her arms wrapped around her legs, and her face buried between her legs, she rocked as if she tried to soothe herself. I couldn't see her face, but now I understood why the kid called her a girl with fire in her hair. An abundance of red curls hid her face, the colors of the burning bright sunset and flames. Just like fire.

She looked fragile. Callahan said she was fourteen, but it was hard to tell. Even from here, I could see her legs were covered in ugly bruises.

"Can you open the door?" I asked the boy.

Luca still had his gun trained on him, in case he tried something stupid. The boy's eyes darted to the wall next to the door, and I followed his gaze. There was a key hanging there, and without question, I grabbed it and shoved the old fashioned key into the lock. The door was a heavy wood, probably dating back a hundred years. It wasn't meant to keep soldiers behind them but little girls, they wouldn't be able to get through it.

As soon as the lock sounded off, the girl's whole body startled and her head snapped up.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Luca's furious voice reached behind me.

Blood was smeared all over her face, a big gash against her temple, her lip split, and a purple bruise marred her right cheek. What the hell did they do to her? She looked like she had been beaten badly. Fury and rage boiled inside me, but I controlled it, to ensure I wouldn't scare her.

The moment her eyes connected with mine, all the oxygen left me. She was just a kid, but her eyes… those breathtaking, bruised big blue eyes dominated her heart shaped face. There was so much pain in them, my heart actually clenched. I have seen death, killed my fair share of men, caused pain and destruction to a lot of them, but nothing had ever gotten to my blackened heart. The pained look in this girl's eyes just about brought me to my knees.

She eyed me warily… resignation in them. She was a fucking kid. What have they done to her?

"We are here to help you," I spoke softly. "I'm Cassio. This is my brother Luca." Her eyes remained on me, unmoving. She didn't trust us. "Callahan sent us."

No recognition, no movement. "We came to take you home."

I slowly inched closer with each word.

Her tongue swept over the cut on her bottom lip, then she bit hard into her lip, causing the blood to trickle down her chin. She didn't ease the bite and I worried she'd bite her lip off.

"I don't want to see anymore," her voice was hoarse, as if it hurt her to talk. "P-please, don't make me."

I had no clue what she was talking about. I swallowed hard and emotions I had never felt before threatened to come to the surface. That should have been my first clue. My heart never moved. For anyone. I was a stone cold killer, ruthless against my enemies and cold towards everyone else.

After all, it was the reason the underworld was scared of me and my brother. Cross me once and you were dead.

None of this bullshit with second chances. Those kinds of sentiments got you killed.

“We are taking you home,” I said firmly, shoving my heart that felt for this girl to the back burner. I had to remind myself soft was not who I was.

She didn’t move and I took another step towards her.

“I want my mom,” she murmured, her ocean pools tempting me to drown in them. A piece of my heart cracked at her admission. No kid should go through something like that. Luca and I endured beatings from our father and seen cruelty from an early age. We were used to it; this kid was not.

Goddamn it, I didn’t need this now.

“She wants you too.” I kept my voice low and soft. “We’ll take you home. Can you walk?”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a lollipop. It was a force of habit I had hard time getting rid of. When Luca and I were kids, if our father decided to beat us, it was the only thing that made Luca feel better, so I always kept one on hand. I extended my hand with it, and her eyes watched my outstretched hand and the lollipop as if she was scared that if she reached for it, it would disappear.

“It’s okay,” I urged her on. We really had to get going, but I didn’t want to cause her more pain or scare the shit out of her by picking her up without her consent. God knew what she went through here. “Take my hand.”

She reached out, her wrist at a weird angle that told me it was broken. Her hand shook badly as she slowly, painfully slowly, reached for mine. I saw she had blue and purple bruises all up her arm too. I gritted my teeth to stop curses leaving my lips. The last thing she needed was my fury too. Although I tempered it, she still sensed my rage because her reach faltered and fear flashed in her big eyes.

I closed the gap and our fingers touched. “Let’s go home to your mom.”

She gasped softly in surprise. “You feel real,” she whispered, her voice shaking. She took the lollipop, but I could see the pain that crossed her features as she picked it up.

“That’s right,” I told her. “We’ll get you out of here.”

Rage rolled off Luca, but I was grateful he kept his emotions at bay. This kid needed us to get her out of her, not rain our revenge on these assholes. Though I’d be sure to come back and burn this place down.

She placed her small blood covered hand in mine and I wrapped my fingers around it. A slight wince crossed her face and I cursed myself for not being more careful.

“Can you stand up?” I asked her.

She went to move her legs pressed against her chest and slowly she stretched them over the little corner bed. I noted whip marks on her legs and I felt myself shake with rage. As if she felt it, those beautiful blue lagoon eyes raised up to me.

“You are doing good,” I soothed her, forcing a smile.

Wincing, she stood up and pain crossed her face. She was hurt, badly. There would be no way she’d be able to walk, even less run out of here.

Luca and I locked eyes, both of us having the same exact thought.

“What’s your name?” I asked her, keeping my tone gentle. I wasn’t sure if I succeeded. I honestly couldn’t remember the last time I used a calming, soothing tone towards anyone. Probably my brother when we were kids, but that was a long time ago.

Her eyes turned warily again and I wondered what she was thinking. “My mum didn’t give you my name?”

It was the first time I detected a light accent in her words. I frowned. It was British. Callahan never stepped foot outside the U.S. Who was this girl?

“I never met your mother,” I explained. It wasn’t her mother that hired me. My sixth sense was telling me she

didn’t know Callahan. “A mutual friend of hers and mine asked me to help.”

Although, I had no idea why. Callahan and I weren’t exactly friends. Something about this girl seemed familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. It was hard to think seeing the beaten state she was in. I wanted to punish all that had caused her this pain, regardless that she was nothing to me.

“Butterfly,” I started. Great, I already gave her a nickname. “My brother, Luca, will carry you so we can get out of here fast.” I was a better shot, so he’d have to carry her.

“No,” she whimpered. Her whole body started shaking, her eyes big with fear and her fingers squeezed mine tight although I was sure that caused her pain. The lollipop slid to the floor, but she paid it no attention.

“You can’t walk like this,” I tried to sooth her.

“You carry her,” Luca suggested in a low voice. “You have her already, just lift her and let’s get the hell out of here.”

He was right. I was surprised we didn’t have men swarming this place already. Without another word, I grabbed the lollipop off the floor, then scooted her up into my arms effortlessly. She weighed barely anything. I knew the movement hurt her even before the whimper left her lips.

“I’m sorry,” I told her in a soothing voice. “I know it hurts. When we are safe, we’ll get you a doctor.”

She shut her eyes, her breathing slightly shallow.

“I got you,” I murmured softly, ensuring I had a good grip of my gun and could maneuver my right hand with her in my arms.

“Is there another way out?” Luca asked the kid. “Show me a way out, and I’ll give you American dollars.”

He nodded and instead of going back the way we came, we carried on down the hallway cave. I prayed to God this

kid delivered, otherwise we'd all be dead. Suddenly, getting out of here alive meant more than ever before. This girl deserved to live.

True to the kid's word, we found a way out.

"Give the kid money as promised," I told Luca. Hell, if I had my entire bank account at disposal right now, I'd give it to this kid.

Luca handed him a roll of hundred dollar bills. "You shouldn't go back there, kid," he told him. I wasn't sure if he would or wouldn't.

"Let's go," both of us started running.

I glanced down at a small body in my arms, covered in blood and bruises. Her eyes were still squeezed shut, as if she hoped everything would go away. Luca glanced her way several times, his lips pressed in a thin line. This girl still wore her school uniform.

How long was she here for? I recalled Callahan stating she had been missing for a week, but this girl looked like she'd been beaten for a month straight.

"There it is." The helicopter was still here, thank God.

We sped up running.

"Just in fucking time," the co-pilot shouted. "Those bastards were shooting at us."

"Thank you for waiting," I told him. He probably saved all of our lives by waiting. "Let's go."

His eyes shifted to the girl in my arms, taking inventory of her state.

"Fucking sick bastards," he muttered with fury.

I should have sat her and buckled her into her own seat, but she shook so bad, I didn't have it in me. So I buckled us together. Maybe I was going for the award of the caretaker of the century? Fuck if I knew, but nobody had ever brought out this protectiveness within me before. I was protective as hell of my little brother, but that didn't even scratch the surface of this feeling. It was fucking scary as shit.

The pilot glanced back and saw us violating the safety by sitting together but the moment his eyes traveled over her, he remained silent.

“The Prime Minister’s daughter?” he asked, shock coloring his voice and disbelief in his eyes.

That’s right!

No wonder she looked familiar. She was the British darling, a little celebrity in political and social circles. She had been in the U.S news a lot. Her mother was the daughter of an old political family that had connections to the Irish mafia. I bet it was how this rescue mission came to be.

“Butterfly, can I check your shoulder?” I asked her in a low voice. Callahan didn’t give me much of a description but the butterfly birthmark was one clear designation of our rescue target. Shame on me for not checking before now. This was how much she rattled me.

She met my eyes and again I felt oxygen drain out of my lungs. How was she doing this to me? Giving me a curt nod, I unbuttoned the top button only of what used to be a white blouse to her uniform, then peaked at the back of her shoulder. Yes, there was a butterfly birthmark there.

“Thank you.” The fact that she let me do that spoke volumes to me. Either she trusted me greatly or she feared me greatly. Neither was good. I buttoned her shirt back up and held her tight as we left the wretched place behind.

As soon as the helicopter landed twenty minutes later, we carried on towards my luxury private plane that awaited us. Callahan sent a message two days ago asking permission to wait with the girl’s mother in my plane. We have been in the field for the past two days, studying the ins and outs of that fucking hole and the guards’ schedule.

Fuck, that should have been my clue this girl was important. Callahan never left the U.S. and now he was in the Middle East with the mother of this girl. What was the story here?

As I climbed down the steps with the girl in my arms, the wife of the Prime Minister came out meeting us halfway.

“My baby,” she cried out, her trembling hands reaching for her. Her mother was pale, the terror written all over her face. I imagined the days and nights since her daughter’s abduction were a nightmare. I recalled stories of the several miscarriages blasted all over tabloids before they finally had a daughter. Áine was their only child.

Her daughter looked nothing like her mother. Her mother was in her forties, had dark hair and dark eyes and olive tone skin. Actually, recalling the image of the Prime Minister, this girl didn’t look anything like her father either.

Callahan showed up at the door of the plane, his eyes on the two women. His face was an unmoving mask although I detected anger boiling underneath it all. He met my eyes and nodded. The acknowledgement of his debt.

No wonder he didn’t have qualms about undefined debt. The Prime Minister would owe him a significant favor, probably a lifetime of favors, for this.

“Baby,” she whispered, tears spilling down her face. Her fingers traced her daughter’s bruised face. “It’s mom.”

Her daughter opened her eyes, searching out for her mom. My eyes traveled to Callahan and for a fraction of a second, I saw shattering in his gaze as he watched mother and daughter.

“Mum,” she cried out in a low, shaking voice.

“Let’s get in and get going,” Luca told her mom, delaying their reunion. He was right, we had to leave this country as soon as possible.

Glancing down at this young girl, I spoke softly. “There is a full bathroom here. Want to get cleaned up?”

“Y-yes, please.”

With her mother at my tail, I strode into the back of the plane where the luxury bedroom was and went through the door to a full bath with a sauna in it. To this day I never

understood why I was persuaded to buy a plane with a full blown bathroom and sauna, but I was thankful for it now.

I slowly sat the girl down onto the closed toilet lid and her mother wrapped her little body into her arms.

“I am so sorry, baby,” her mother murmured against her hair. “I am so sorry.”

“Your mom will stay here so I can talk to the pilot and have us going,” I was careful to keep my voice soft and low. “As soon as we are in the air, we’ll get the shower going.”

She nodded, just barely. Her face was a striking mixture of blood and bruises against her fair skin. I wanted to go back and bomb that place down, make all those men pay that made her hurt like this.

I stood up ready to leave, watching in the mirror as her mother crouched next to the girl, with tears streaming down her face.

“I got you, baby,” she murmured softly to her daughter, wrapping her arms around her daughter.

Her mother didn’t see her wince upon receiving the hug. I wouldn’t have caught it either if I wasn’t watching their reflection in the mirror. Despite the pain, she leaned against her mother. Maybe it was good that her mother came. This kid would need her now more than ever.

Upon entering the main cabin, I saw Luca gulp a glass of whiskey down and then pour himself another one. Seeing me, he poured another glass and handed me a glass. I needed it; we both did.

“Fuck,” he muttered as he gulped another glass down.

Callahan sat stiffly, his eyes focused out the window. I bet he was going down the list of items he’d make the Prime Minister do for him.

I pushed the intercom. “Get us out of here,” I told the pilot.

“Roger that,” he retorted and engines roared up.

“You good, brother?” I asked him. We’ve both done and seen plenty of fucked up shit but certain things were

harder to see than others. Seeing this girl today was definitely one of the harder things. I knew the same was true for my brother.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “I will be. But will she?”

Loud sobs broke out in the other room and I wasn’t sure if that was the answer. I heard Callahan’s teeth grind and his jaw clenched, ready to snap.

There is a story there, I was sure of it. *Who is this girl to him?*

“It’s okay, my baby,” we both heard the mother soothing her daughter. “You are safe now.”

Wretched soft sobs that followed were a hard punch in the gut. My heart twisted for her and the pain she undoubtedly felt. Her sobs echoed through the plane, and I could see it was hitting Luca and Callahan in the worst ways.

“Callahan, did the Prime Minister give you this job?” I questioned him. His jaw might snap at any moment.

“No, the girl’s mother did,” he answered after a heartbeat of silence. I was surprised to hear that answer. So where was his leverage?

“Does the Prime Minister know that she reached out to the head of the Irish mafia in the U.S. to retrieve her daughter? It is career suicide.” We all knew it was. If this got out, regardless of the reason for it, his opponents would bring him down.

Callahan shook his head in response.

“Why do it then?” I questioned him. “Save the girl, get indebted to me, and get nothing out of it?”

“Her mother and I grew up together,” he replied, his voice tired. “She should have been my wife, and that girl should have been my daughter. That is reason enough for me.”

Another heart wrenching sob tore through the plane and Callahan winced. The tough fucker actually winced. People feared him, cowered in front of him, ran from him, and he

looked like he was being torn in half now. I couldn't blame him though. Hearing those sobs cut deep into my heart too. And I had barely any heart.

"I-I didn't say anything, Mum," she stuttered through her sobs, her voice shaking with fear.

"Don't worry about that." Her mother's voice was shaking too.

"Mommy, I-"

Her sobs got harder and my hands curled into a fist. I wanted to punch something. The pain I heard in her voice was gutting me from the inside. Luca refilled all our drinks without another word.

"Listen to me, my love," her mother's voice was shaking, just as much as her daughters. "Whatever happened, you shove it away."

I heard gagging and some shuffling, the sound of glass crashing. Instantly, all three of us ran to the back of the plane.

I got there right on time to see the kid getting sick into the toilet, her body convulsing and shaking. Her mother was a mess while her daughter's body retched, trying to dump the contents of her stomach but probably not having much in it.

"Baby," her mother was rubbing her back, her voice a whimper. The woman was trying hard to be strong for her daughter and failing miserably. "It's okay."

"No, it's not." A whispered broken reply was barely audible, the ember flamed hair covering her face as her forehead lay on her forearm leaned against the toilet seat. "I didn't say anything." Her small body shook, and she repeated. "I didn't say a word."

I wasn't sure what she was trying to say. Not sure if I wanted to know. I could see her mother was at a loss too.

"What do you mean, baby?" The way her mother asked the question, I got the sense she was scared to get an answer.

The girl's body retched again. In her state, I worried how much pain she was causing herself. If a hug hurt her, this was ten times worse. She gagged and threw up again, nothing but acid water in her stomach.

"Baby, please," her mother's words were barely a whisper. "Please calm down."

"I said nothing," She repeated low through her soft sobs. "They- the men… " her throat was bobbing as she tried to swallow hard. "I said nothing," she repeated, whispering. "I-I didn't save them."

I saw Callahan clenching his fist. Luca was ready to lose his shit and punch something, and I… all I wanted to do was take this girl's pain away and then go back and torture every single one of those motherfuckers.

Heavy silence fell in the room. Her mother pressed her hand against her mouth, silencing her whimpers. She was desperately trying to be strong for her daughter that was falling apart in front of our eyes.

"That's behind you now," her mother attempted.

"I didn't say a word to save them," she repeated desperately again, agony in her voice. "I should have tried… I didn't say a word."

She was fourteen for Christ's sake.

I vowed once the mother and daughter were dropped off safely wherever they were going, I would return. Luca and I locked gazes. No words were needed, he nodded and we knew we were coming back.

The mother cried, her own body shaking. She stood up and buried her face into Callahan's chest. Fuck that! She should take care of her daughter, be strong for her. This kid has been to hell and back; she needed her mother now.

I shot a glare in her direction. Callahan caught it and there was warning in his eyes. Yes, this fucking man cared for this woman still. What did he think he would get with her? She was the Prime Minister's wife, for Christ's sake.

I kneeled onto the floor and put my hand on the girl's back. The motion felt unfamiliar, clumsy. My hand was too big and too rough to offer comfort. I couldn't recall the last time I offered it to anyone.

"Listen to me," I started softly. Hopefully, I was doing this right. I didn't want to cause more trauma to the poor kid. "You have bruises and scars, but you are going to be okay," I told her. "You are strong. Those men are cowards. They will die."

Her body stilled, and I could have sworn she held her breath.

Inhale. Exhale. Another inhale. Another exhale.

Slowly, she lifted herself and sat on her folded legs. My hand was still around her. After everything she had been through, I was scared to let her go.

Her bruised deep blue eyes met mine, her split lip trembling as she asked. "Will you kill them?"

I heard her mother's sharp inhale but right now, nobody mattered but this hurt little girl.

"Every single one of them," I vowed.

"Good."

Yes, this girl was strong.

*** To Be Continued ***

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